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**The Zomi-Kuki Intra-Ethnic Conflict in Manipur, 1997-1998 Causes and Consequences**

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## **1. Introduction**

The Zomis and the Kukis, belonging to the same 'Chin-Mizo/Zomi-Kuki' ethnic group fought a bloody and a costly war in Churachandpur district of Manipur from June, 1997 to October, 1998. Being people of the same ethnic family, they share the same origin, the same history, culture and religion etc. They speak near identical dialects belonging to Tibeto-Burman group of languages. They are found predominantly co-inhabiting Churachandpur district of Manipur bordering Chin Hills of Myanmar. While the people who identified themselves as Zomis are largely confined in Churachandpur district of Manipur, the same people who identified themselves as Kuki spread in all the hill districts of Manipur. They are found inhabiting small pockets in Ukhul, Chandel, Tamenglong and Senapati districts. They, however, formed majority in the newly created Kangpokpi district. In short, with the exception of the newly created Kangpokpi district, they are minority community in the rest of the hill districts of Manipur. In Churachandpur, the Paites, the leading tribe of the Zomi formed the single largest community of the districts.

## **2. Events leading to the conflict**

The relations between different tribes of Chin-Mizo/Zomi-Kuki had not been so cordial ever since the inclusions of different tribes of the ethnic group in the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe List of the Constitution of India, in 1956, who were earlier clubbed together under "Any Kuki Tribe" Following the constitutional recognition accorded to these tribes as separate tribe, many tribes who were earlier clubbed together under "Any Kuki Tribe" started to identify themselves as a separate tribe, not included under the nomenclature of Kuki. The Khulmi National Union was formed as a substitute for Kuki. The Khulmi National Union was also short lived, lasting not even a year as the Hmars, one of the major communities left the union and started supporting and aligning themselves with the Mizo Union which was formed earlier in Lushai Hills. In the meantime, the Thadou majority retained Kuki as their undisputed nomenclature and tried to woo other smaller tribes to come under the fold of Kuki nomenclature. However, the Hmars and the Paites, the two major tribes refused to identify themselves as Kuki. Since then, relation between the Thadou speaking people and other majority tribes, including the Paites and the Hmars had been more and more strained culminating into the outbreak of Hmar-Kuki intra-ethnic armed conflict in early 1960s. Though there had not been an open armed conflict among the same ethnic group since then, the relation between them was not so good and cordial. The main issue of contention, being absence of commonly acceptable nomenclature, major tribes of the ethnic group are engaged in searching for a commonly acceptable nomenclature. While the Hmar are infavour of Mizo, the Paites are more inclined to accept Zomi. On the other hand, the Thadous are consistently infavour of Kuki and stick to it. The contestation went on and there seemed to be no solution insight.

In the meantime, the Thadou Kuki and the Nagas of Manipur fought a bloody ethnic war in different hill districts of Manipur in 1993 over control of Moreh, the only international market outlet and over claims and counter claims over ownership of lands they co-inhabit in different hill districts of Manipur. Sensing the imminent outbreak of conflict with the Nagas, the Kuki formed their armed group,

Kuki National Front (KNF) in the later part of 1980s. When an armed conflict happened to be a reality, the KNF took the burden of protecting the Kukis from the Nagas. As the conflict became more and more intensified, the Nagas formed the Naga Lim Gourd to protect the Nagas from the onslaught of KNF.

As the conflict between the Nagas and the Kukis continued, a number of Kuki refugees entered Churachandpur district, thereby starting to disturb the population balance of the district which was so much resented to by the Paites, the single largest community of the district. In 1993, the Zomi Re-Unification Organization was formed with the aim to unify all tribes under the same, Chin-Mizo/Zomi-Kuki ethnic group in Manipur under the umbrella of Zomi nomenclature. Eventually, since the relation with Thadou speaking community got more and more strained; and with the aim to protect and further the interest of Zomis, as against the growing threat from the KNF. Incident of violence involving the Kuki and the Paite communities became more and more frequent, though open armed conflict could be avoided till June, 1997.

### 3. The Conflict

Though there had been hatred and misunderstanding between the Thadou speaking community and The Paite speaking community of the same ethnic group right from the later part of 1950s, the actual open arm conflict started only in 1997.. It was the midnight of January 24, 1997, that armed cadres of KNF (Kuki National Front) swapped down on Saikul Paite village and kidnapped 15 male members of the village, 10 out of 15 kidnapped persons were killed instantly and injured mortally 5 others. The KNF claimed 5 out of 10 killed were cadres of NSCN (IM) which, however, was refuted and rejected flatly by the people of the village.

In the early hours of the following day i.e. Paite residents of Churachandpur town started retaliation by attacking those few pockets of Thadou Kuki inhabited localities in the town and burnt down houses believed to be that of the Thadou Kuki speaking people. Thereafter, attacking and counter attacking of villages started. All business transactions in the town stood a grinding halt for more than a year. What could be seen in the street of Churachandpur town was volunteers, ready to attack villages and localities of their adversaries . During more than one year of the conflict as per Government record 352 people were killed and 136 were injured. As per government's record 50 villages and 4670 houses were destroyed or gutted to ashes and some 13000 people ran for their life as refugees in Mizoram and Chin Hills of Myanmar. The actual figures of people killed and injured; villages and houses burnt down could be much higher than the mentioned figures.

### 4. The Peace initiatives

Though giving of peace and security to citizens is supposed to be the primary duty of modern democratic governments, the government, both at the centre and the state failed to give peace and security to the people. People were left unprotected from imminent and impending danger of attack. However, at the time when people are in dire need of protection, peace initiative was for the first time taken up by the Government of Mizoram, the neighbouring state in July 1997. A team consisting of 3 members Viz. Pu. C. Lawmkunga, Pu. H. Zathuama and Pu. F. Lawmkima were sent to Churachandpur by government of Mizoram to initiate peace process between the two warring communities. The team invited the leaders of KNF and ZRA to sit-down to negotiate for restoration of peace. On the request of the team, leaders of the two warring communities, agreed to sign a peace agreement, and eventually, on 8th July, 1997, a peace agreement was signed by KNF(P) and ZRA on behalf of the two communities. However, even before a day passed after the signing of the agreement, the KNF(P) abrogated the agreement by attacking Mata village, located in the vicinity of Churachandpur town.

Again, on the initiative of peace workers from both the communities, a second peace agreement was signed on the 17th July, 1997 on the terms and conditions laid down in the first peace agreement. However, this was once again abrogated by the KNF(P) by attacking Tallian and Savaipaih villages in which 13 houses were burnt down along with properties therein.

Though late it was, the Government of Manipur finally intervened by taking initiative to have a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The Government of Manipur, under the leadership of the chief Minister, Nipamacha Singh invited leaders of the two communities to negotiating table; and finally an MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) was signed on March 26, 1998. As per MoU signed, a Cease-Fire was declared which got extended for 3times until a final peace agreement could be signed. As per the agreement, the Kuki Innpi, Churachandpur was to throw a feast of apology for killing 10 people at Saikul Paite Village by killing a cow. Accordingly, the Kuki Innpi Churachandpur killed a cow and organized a feast as a sign of apology to the Zomis. The Zomi Council, on behalf of Zomis killed a pig and organized another feast on the following day as a signed of acceptance of the apology tendered by Kuki Innpi, Churachandpur. Peace was finally restored in the district.

Terms and conditions of the Peace Agreement was under:-

1. That every individual or tribes should be given the freedom to be either Kuki or Zomi or have any other identity. No force should be used against those who make these choices.
2. Those who have during the conflict, occupied the property or houses of those people who fled, should return them to the rightful owner.
3. The Kuki and Zomi Militant group should not levy taxes on anyone other than persons of their own tribe. It includes the Government employees, the public in general, contractor and businessman.
4. This MoU is meant for all tribes, individuals and Organizations and to be followed by all, was signed by the followings on behalf of the Kukis and the Zomi on the 31st October, 1998.

Sd/-  
H.Thuamson President,  
PNC/Member ZC  
Sd/-  
K. Vungjalian  
Chairman, ZC  
Sd/-  
Thangkhingin  
ZC Member  
Sd/-  
Pakholal Vaiphei  
Ex. Pre. VNO/Member KIC

Sd/-  
Albert Gengoukhup  
KIC President  
Sd/-  
Khajialam Gangte  
Chief of Chiengkongpang  
Sd/-  
Ngamhao Touthang  
Advisor, KIC  
Sd/-  
Khaipao Haokip  
Advisor, KIC

**Witnesses:**

1. W. Nipamacha Singh, Chief Minister, Manipur
2. Dr. L. Chandramani Singh, Dy. CM, Manipur
3. V. Hangkhanlian, Minister
4. T.N.Haokip, Minister (Seri)
5. T.T. Haokip, Dy. Speaker
6. N.Songchinkhup, Minister (Transport)
7. Dr. Chaltonlien Amo, Minister
8. P.Bharat Singh, Special secretary, Home
9. Sriram Taranikanti, DC/CCPur
10. H.Kulla, Meitei Society President
11. Albert Renthlei, President, Mizo People Convention
12. L.B.Sona, Speaker, ZC13. Paokhosei Kipgen, Social Worker

**5. Causes of the conflict**

1. The most important and the most undisputed cause of the conflict was the long standing disagreement between the two major communities of the ethnic group appeared to be the issue of common nomenclature viz. Zomi and Kuki. The Thadou speaking people firmly stick to Kuki as the common nomenclature for the ethnic group in Manipur, the Paite speaking people, while refusing to accept Kuki, projected Zomi as common nomenclature for the same ethnic group in Manipur. Since either of the two community refused to compromise on their respective stand for either of the two, there exists even till today a kind of hatred towards each other. It is, therefore, believed that lack of consensus on the issue of common nomenclature is the indirect cause of the conflict between the two major communities of the ethnic group in Manipur.

2. The second cause of the conflict is believed to be tax collection by KNF(P) from business establishments and individuals, including the Paites. Since the Paite speaking majority inhabitants of the town refused to pay taxes to KNF(P), a kind of misunderstanding and hatred developed between them which eventually calminated into the outbreak of open armed conflict.

3. The third cause of the conflict is also believed to be the heavy inflow of displaced Kukis in Churachandpur district from other hill districts of Manipur. When a members of refugees entered in the district in large number, the Paites, the single majority community of the district were apprehensive of the possible disturbance of the existing population balance of the district. They, in spite of the fact that, belong to the same ethnic family, could not offer a welcoming gesture to those refugees who were mainly from Thadou speaking community. This was much resented to by the Thadou community and took it otherwise, or as a support to the Nagas. Relation between the Thadou speaking Kukis and the Paite speaking Zomis was at a bottom low. It is, therefore, considered that the ever straining relation between the Thadous and the Paites was a contributing factor to the war.

4. Finally though not the least, the most immediate cause of the conflict was the killing of 10 Paites and wounding mortally 5 others at Saikul Paite Village, on the June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1997. In the early hours of the following day, the Paite residents of the town retaliated the killing by attacking those Thadou Kuki localities of the town. Thereafter, retaliations and counter retaliations continued till the signing of cease-fire agreement on 25th March, 1998.

## 6. Conclusion: Consequences.

The conflict under study, has a far reaching consequences on the socio-economic and political life of the two warring people. Prior to the conflict people of the two warring communities co-inhabitated intermingly in different localities in the spirit of peaceful co-existence. Though the conflict ended with the signing of peace agreement in October, 1998 at the insistence of the Government, people of the two communities do not have the true spirit of reconciliation as peace agreement was signed by leaders of the two communities, but the people of the communities in-conflict were not either involved or a party to the agreement. This has led to the continued existence of mutual mistrust which in turn has created a warlike situation, which unless checked, always have the potential to cause the outbreak of another war for the second time. The war has virtually destroyed the social fabric of the people leading to mutual suspicion on any issues, social, political, etc.

It could be seen that there still exists a kind of hatred against each other, and the spirit of peaceful co-existence has yet been a far cry. Any incident of violence involving people of the two communities, though might not essentially be communal, has often been interpreted as having communal color. Even, a minor incidence of vehicle mishap involving people of the two communities, are many a time interpreted as having communal motive. It is, therefore, felt that real peace, peace in the spirit of forgive and forget has not yet been achieved till today, more than 20 years after the signing of peace agreement. Those people from the two communities who lost their near and dear ones during the conflict and those whose properties were gutted to ashes are stilling suffering from mental wounds that need a healing touch. Due to lack of healing touch to their mental and spiritual wounds, these peoples from the two communities still have the spirit of revenge, which if not healed in time, could one day or the other culminate into the outbreak of another war, possibly much more devastating in nature and magnitude.

One of the reflection of the presence of hatred towards each other is that Churachandpur town is virtually divided into two parts based on area of domination and control. Northern part of the town including Tuibuang and Village located in its peripheries are under the virtual control of Thadou speaking Kukis while southern parts of the town, including the two main market areas, Zenhang Bazaar and New Bazaar are virtually controlled by the Paite speaking Zomis along with other smaller tribes of the ethnic group. This is a reflection of the fact that people of the two communities do not have the most needed spirit, the spirit of peaceful co-existence.

### **Sources of Information**

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3. An interview with Mr. T. Tunzakam, Sahei Road, Vengnuam Churachandpur, on 03-02-2016
4. An interview with Mr. M. Zamkham Chief of Saikul Paite village and an eye witness to Saikul massacre on 16-05-2016.
5. An interview with Mr. T. Zarual, a prominent member of Singngat village on 11-01-2017.
6. An interview with Mr. IB Sona, the Ex-Chairman of Zomi Council on 07-02-2016.

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