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Contextualising the Kuki Uprising (1917-1919)

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Contextualising the Kuki Uprising (1917-1919) of North East India*

Abstract

The Kuki Uprising of 1917-1919 has been one of the most important anti-colonial tribal revolts during the interwar period. Yet it is one of the least studied. This essay studies the context, nature, trajectory and impact of the uprising, locating it in the history and historiography of tribal revolts in India.

Keywords: The Kuki, Tribal revolt, Subaltern, Resistance, Northeast India.

Introduction

Kunwar Suresh Singh in his essay on Birsa Munda pointed out that “tribals revolted more often and far more violently than any other community including peasants in India.”¹ This is because the intensity of colonialism was more in the tribal areas of India than other areas. The commercialisation thrust of British rule had intensified the already existing tendency of penetration of tribal areas by exogenous elements like traders, land-grabbers, and contractors all plainsmen (*Dikus*) leading gradual dispossession, exploitation, alienation and increasing pauperisation. In other words, colonial rule had exposed the tribal areas to both colonial and non-tribal exploitation. The resistance to such massive oppression tended to be violent as that was the nature of subaltern politics. It is a rebellion which had to be ‘public, collective, destructive and total.’² The so impoverished areas were the recruiting fields for British slave drivers for indentured labour for plantations, mines, and factories within India and abroad.³ As a result of British reforms, there was three-fold change in (i) Economic (ii) Administrative and (iii) Legal system.⁴ These changes affected the entire life of the people of India particularly the lower class. As a result of these reforms various rebellions emerged in various parts of India every year right from 1757. These rebellions were of three types (i) Civil rebellions where civilians participated in the movement (ii) peasant movement where peasants participated in the movement (iii) tribal uprisings where tribals participated in the movement.⁵

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However, the tribal and peasant revolts have been clubbed together in the historiography of freedom struggle of India. Even when a distinction has been made between the two, these were studied together.⁶ However, they are still seen as rural protests and agrarian movements and not seen as a political movement to overthrow the colonial state. It is unfortunate that the tribals have not been accorded a separate space in the Marxist or even Subaltern historiography. This was another instance of the marginalization of tribals in Indian history. It is even said that 'They (tribals) never experienced a sensation of being in a country called India and they were hardly influenced by the struggle for freedom or other movements.'⁷ A large number of peasants and tribal uprisings took place during the pre-mutiny period. Most of the early rebellions were in Bengal Presidency. The Sanyasi Rebellion (1763-1800) was one such. The revolt was a result of the colonial policy of dispossessing the Zamindars as well as the peasants from their means of production. Surprisingly, this movement was led by religious monks.⁸ We find reference to this movement in the novel *Anandamath* by Bankim Chandra. This was followed by the Chuar uprising (1766-72) in five districts of Bengal. It was crushed but re-emerged in 1775 and continued up to 1816. In other parts of eastern India the farmers/peasant movements arose in Rongpur and Dinajpur in 1783 and Bishnupur and Bhirbhum in 1799, all in Bengal; the Zamindar revolt in Orissa (1804-17) and the peasant movement in Sambalpur (1827-40). In South India the Raja of Vizianagaram revolted in 1794. The revolt by the Poligars in Tamilnadu (1790s) was followed by the uprisings by the Poligar community of Malabar and Coastal Andhra in the first decade of the 19th century. Dewan Valu Thampi of Travancore organized a heroic revolt in 1805. The revolt of Parlekamedi took place in 1813-14. The Mysore peasants revolt (1830-31), the Vizagapatnam peasant revolt (1830-34) and the tribal uprisings of Ganjam (1835) and Kurnool (1840-47) were a few other notable uprisings. In western India the famous revolts that emerged in the pre-mutiny era were those by the chiefs of Sourashtra (1816-18) and the Kolis of Gujrat (1824-28 and 1839-49). There were a few revolts after the defeat of the Peshwa. Popular among them were the Bhil uprising (1818-31), the Kittu uprising (1824), the Satara uprising (1841), and the revolt of the Gadkaris (1844). Northern India was no less turbulent. The western part of present day Uttar Pradesh and Haryana rose up in arms in 1824. Other major revolts were in Bilaspur (1805), in Aligarh by the Talukdars (1814-17) and the peasant revolt of Khandesh (1852). The second Punjab war took place in 1848-49.⁹

Though these rebellions were massive and frequent, almost sequential, they were based on local causes and grievances and isolated from each other. Though they often

bore the same character it was only because they represented common conditions though separated in time and space. The semi feudal leaders of these rebellions were socially, economically and politically backward looking and traditional in outlook; such backward and scattered uprisings were incapable of overthrowing foreign rule. The historical significance of these uprisings lies in the fact that they established strong and valuable local traditions of resistance against British rule. The Indian people were to draw inspiration from these traditions in the later nationalist struggle for freedom.

There was some major tribal uprising that took place during the pre-mutiny period. The tribal people, spread over a large part of India, organized hundreds of militant outbreaks and insurrections during this period. These uprisings were marked by immense courage and sacrifice on their part—prominent among these being the Santhal uprising (1854-56) and Kol uprising (1831-33). The British East India Company emerged as the dominating power in the political scene after the battle of Plassey in June 1757. From that time onwards the entire British period is marked by divide and rule, conquest and consolidation and economic reforms for their commercial gain. The British East India Company was primarily a commercial company. So, after capturing power in India, they were changing the entire administrative, economic and legal structure for their commercial gain so that they could make more money by exploitation. These changes led to the disruption of the agrarian society. The colonial policy of enhancing demands for land revenue and compulsorily squeezing the peasants out of their last penny had converted rural India into a minefield of revolts. In Bengal, land revenue collection was raised to nearly double the amount collected under the Mughals. The situation in other areas also was similar. Zamindars were losing their land for failing to pay their demanded revenue. Peasants were selling or leasing their lands to pay the increasing revenue. The resulting rural distress not only caused landlessness and poverty but also famine and starvation. It was reflected in twelve major and minor famines that occurred between 1770 and 1857. The decline of Indian traditional handicrafts industries affected artisans very hard. This provided the context to the tribal and peasant revolts. In North East India the pattern was slightly different.

Accordingly, the approaches to the peasant and tribal uprisings too differed. India has a rich history of peasant and tribal resistance but Indian history has been shy of recording their role and contribution in the making of India. In fact, as far as the historiography of peasant movements in India is concerned, Indian peasants, to use Ranajit

Guha's words, have been "denied recognition as a subject of history in his own rights even for a project that was all his own."¹⁰ The peasant uprising in India ranged from local riots to war-like campaigns spread over many districts throughout the British rule. Even though modernity-produced ideology of nationalism was not behind these uprisings, these nevertheless became an organic part of Indian freedom struggle against colonialism.

The historiography of peasants and tribal movements in India can be divided into four broad categories in terms of approaches and ideological affiliations.

1) Colonial Approach

The formative years of colonial rule was ruptured repeatedly by frequent and sporadic peasant uprisings while the regime was trying to adjust to these attacks by means of administrative, legal and legislative controls. Since these uprisings were against the colonial state, they were characterized by the state as 'insurgency' and 'rebellion'. The British tried to keep a record of these movements so that it could understand the nature and motivations of such movements in order to prevent their future occurrences. This is how the very first account of peasant uprisings in colonial India came to be written as administrative documents, dispatches on counterinsurgency operations and reports of investigation. In fact, these were not historical writings but reports. The Reports on the Indigo Commission, Report of the Deccan Riot Commission, Reports of Land Revenue Commission 1940, Famine Enquiry Commission 1945, Correspondence on Moplah outrages in Malabar 1849-53, volumes 1 & 2, 1863, Malabar Special Commission Report 1881-2, volumes 1 & 2 1882, Statement of Case regarding No Rent campaign in U.P. 1931, Provincial Gazetteers and Administrative Reports are the major reports of peasant uprisings under the British rule.¹¹ Indeed these form the basis of colonial historiography. These reports were administrative versions of narratives of events provided by the district heads wherein explanations were given in terms of law and order and the issue of paramount importance was the security of the State.

The British administrators as well as colonial historians, frequently sought to deny the rationality of such resistance efforts; peasant revolts were labelled as 'backward looking' and 'unprogressive', 'the blind hitting out of a people enslaved by primordialism' or 'superstitious consciousness' as an 'insurrection' and as 'murderous revolt.' Some of the millenarian leaders were seen as madmen and their movements as insanity and tribal

superstition. Colonial officials believed they knew what was in the best interests of the tribal and peasantry and such subjects had to be forced, for their own good, to accept the system imposed on them by the state. Little understanding or sympathy was shown for the peasants' motives or analysis undertaken to understand the process of mobilisation and fight of the peasants. The derogatory language of the colonial officials was often regurgitated in a wholly unethical manner in such reports. Indeed these were forms of counterinsurgency through prose.¹² This was how 'the colonialist mind managed to serve *clio* and counterinsurgency at the same time...'¹³

2) Neo-colonial Approach

In the 1960s under the aegis of the Cambridge School of historiography, emerged an approach which can be described as neo-colonial school as their conclusions and ideological affiliations were similar to that of the colonialists.* This School viewed British rule to be generally beneficial to the Indian peasants. According to them, the British introduced a new economic, political and legal infrastructure which encouraged individuals to possess landed property which improved the general economic condition of India. Judith M Brown,¹⁴ for example, gave the entire credit of organizing peasant movements to second-line disciples of Gandhi whom she described as "sub-contractors". These individual leaders like Rajendra Prasad and V.B. Patel held reins of power in the local societies on the strength of which they acted as power brokers between the centre and periphery in the mobilization of peasants in various movements.

This school subsequently developed the theme of 'Indian faction' to explain Indian politics and also the mobilization of peasants. This 'faction' linked the lower strata, the sharecroppers, with the higher strata, the landlords, who in turn were connected to district level factions. The district level boss had ties with the member of the Provincial Assembly. The Assembly member enjoyed proximity to the all India factions. In this way, factional network linked the peasant masses to their national leaders constituting a massive network of mobilization of the people behind factional leaders who have a patron-client relationship.

* Prominent among these group of historians are Judith Brown, *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience: The Mahatma in Indian Politics*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), D A Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics : Madras Presidency 1870-1920*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), C J Baker, *The politics in South India 1920-1927*, (Cambridge University Press, 1976) ; C J Bayly, *Local Roots of Indian Politics – Allahabad 1880-1940*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), B R Tomlinson, *Indian National Congress and the Raj 1929-42*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 1976).

The patrons are leaders who have total control over local politics which underlines their importance at the central and higher level politics.

The changes brought by the British rule in India resulted in the replacement of the old communal form of rights in land by individual private property. This eventually led to the emergence of two categories of peasants – rich and poor. The richer peasantry was the rural bosses, who the poorer ones were subordinated by bonds of clientele like share-cropping, money lending and tenancy. These rich peasants used their control to organize peasant agitations which were really in the interests of the rich. Even the revolts of the marginalized *adivasis* were seen as primitive and pre political – a desperate gut reaction of the destitute and the hungry without clear cut strategy or aims. Even these outbreaks could be manipulated by the rural rich to serve their class interests.

From within Cambridge School, Eric Stokes ('The Return of the Peasant in South Asian History' in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* Vol. 6, Issue1 Dec. 1976 incorporated to his *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in agrarian society and peasant rebellion in colonial India*, Cambridge, 1978) argued that there were two types of agrarian protests in the early 20th century and late 19th century India. (1) By rich peasantry in areas of high farming who were seeking to extend their power and (2) by pauperized peasants who had suffered badly as a result of colonial rule. Seen in this perspective the resistance against the planters and indigenous landlords in eastern India during the late 19th century represented a bid for rural power by an upwardly mobile class of rich peasants as seen in the protest against high land tax rates in Maharashtra and Gujarat in late 19th century and the protest against Canal Colony administration in Punjab in early 20th century.

American political sociologist, Barrington Moore Junior in his *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and peasant in the making of modern world* argued that the nature of change in a given society is largely determined by the revolutionary potential of the social class like the peasantry. This group has no connection with the Cambridge school, however, it reinforces the Cambridge thinking on peasant movements in India.

The revolutionary temper of this class, in turn, is determined by the nature of power structure and alignment of social classes with this power structure. Thus a bourgeois democratic revolution took place in England, France and America, a Fascist revolution in

Germany and Japan and a Communist Revolution in Russia and China. The Indian peasantry was traditionally docile due to the peculiarities of the caste and village organization and its religio-ethical percept which made the peasant passive and lacking in revolutionary potential. These socio-religious conditions prevented the peasant discontent from developing into extreme class antagonism and this immunized them against any rebellious impulse. Thus there was no strong tradition of peasant revolts in India as in China or Russia.

3) Marxist Approach

The outbreak of the Naxalite movement in the late 1960s led to the revival of interests in peasant movements in India among scholars. A pioneer in this regard was Kathleen Gough, British anthropologist, who wrote an influential article on Indian peasant uprisings.¹⁵ The article raised a counter argument to Barrington Moore's thesis, wherein Gough showed that India had a rich history of peasant uprisings of which Naxalite movement was only a continuation. Gough divided the Indian peasant uprisings in five types (1) Restorative, (2) Millenarian (3) Social Banditry, (4) Terrorist vengeance (5) Mass insurrections. Scholars such as D. N. Dhanagare studied the peasant movements from the Mappilas of Malabar to the Telangana revolts in his *Peasant Movement in India, 1920-1950*. A R Desai edited a volume¹⁶ on peasants revolts covering the entire British period. Sunil Sen's¹⁷ *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47* dealt with the peasant agitation in Bengal on the eve of British withdrawal. B B Choudhury, 'Agrarian Economy and Agrarian relations in Bengal 1859-1885' in N. K. Sinha (ed.) *History of Bengal 1757-1905*, Calcutta, 1967; 'Peasant Movements in Bengal 1850-1900' in *Nineteenth Century Studies*, July 1973; and 'The Story of a Peasant Revolution in a Bengal District' in *Bengal Past & Present*, July-December 1973 are some of the other works.

4) Neo-Marxist Approach

In 1983 a path-breaking study of the structure of peasant resistance in 19th century India was published by Ranajit Guha.¹⁸ Before this work, a group of scholars worked together to establish a new school of historiography known as the Subaltern School. They applied the (Antonio) Gramscian concept 'subaltern' as a blanket term to cover the marginal and non-mainstream classes of the society. This school tried to shift our attention to the unorganized peasant's initiative to resist colonial and class oppression. The major theme of this school was to show that there were two domains of politics in colonial India, elite and subaltern. In

the elite domain, there was scramble for power and privilege whose protests were confined to the legal and political limits prescribed by the colonial state. Hence their mobilization too was from above i.e. vertical. In contrast, the subaltern movements were autonomous whose foundation was laid in the pre colonial times. Subaltern mobilization was horizontal and was based on the traditional organization of kinship or caste organization depending on the level of consciousness. The form of their protests was radical and violent as they were not bound by colonial laws. The movement was essentially self-mobilized and therefore spontaneous. The chief target of these movements was the European planters, indigenous landlords, moneylenders, land tax bureaucrats and forest officials who represented tyranny. These two domains functioned parallel to each other and were by nature antagonistic to each other. But the elites often tried to appropriate the subaltern movements by capturing their leadership and depicting them as elite activities. But each attempt to merge them together often resulted in the eruption of violence. The subalternists found flaws in the traditional 'class model' of the Marxists as far as tribal and peasants movements were concerned and found community and communal power as more viable alternatives.

The main criticism against the subalternists is that they ignored the contribution of the Marxists in pioneering peasant studies in India. In fact, they have brandished even the Marxists as 'elitists'. Secondly, the role of middle-class intervention in peasant movements has totally been ignored. Often, middle-class intervention provides initiative and ideology for a movement that peasants lack. Thirdly, they generalized peasant movements ignoring the fact that there were differences in peasant movements that took place before 1857 and after 1920. In northeast India, for example, which is overwhelmingly tribal, the tribal uprising took place mostly in the post-mutiny period simply because the entry of the British in the region was post 1824, when colonial expansion in most of India had already been completed. These uprisings took place in three chronological forms: initially it was tribal raids in the British areas; secondly it was violent resistance to the British invasion of their territory and thirdly violent uprisings after the establishment of colonial rule which sometimes took millenarian form, sometimes rejection of the authority of the British.

The Kuki uprising was of this third type. Characterizing it as a movement from below, Sumit Sarkar showed that the Kuki uprising was part of the endemic tribal outbreaks in India which continued from nineteenth century down to the twentieth century. He wrote "British efforts to recruit labour for menial work on the Western Front led to a Santal Uprising in

Mayurbhanj and a rebellion in Manipur among the Thadoe Kukis in 1917. Guerrilla war went on here for two years fuelled also by other grievances like *Pothang* (tribals being made to carry the baggage of officials without payment) and Government efforts to stop *Jhum* (shifting cultivation).¹⁹ There has been an attempt here to show the Kuki uprising as confined to the Thadoes only.²⁰ This conclusion had been reached following British propaganda. Recent researches have challenged this propaganda theory and shown that the participation was not just by the Thadoes but many other sub tribes of the Kukis e.g. Dungel, Kipgen, Chonglo, Haokip, Hangshing, Sitlhou, Saun, Langun, Changsan, Lanthay, Ngoislu and others.²¹ In fact, not just the Kukis, the Zous of Manipur, some Naga tribes like the Thangkuls have also participated in the uprising.²² It was a pan-chin movement spanning across India and Burma as shown by Chisti and Bhadra.²³

Although the Kuki uprising has been one of the most discussed tribal revolts of northeast India, it is much too less compared to the literature available on tribal revolts in rest of India. From rest of India there has not been much work done on this massive uprising. The pioneer of the studies on millenarian movements in colonial India Stephen Fuchs calls it a Kuki Naga movement.²⁴ Similarly, Sumit Sarkar confused the Dimasa uprising of Sambhudhan with the Kacha Naga uprising,²⁵ even when there were two major works on the uprising from Manipur.²⁶ Gautam Bhadra was the only mainstream historian who studied the Kuki uprising.²⁷ According to British officials it was the most serious threat to the authority of the British in Manipur since the uprising of Tikendrajit.²⁸ Sir Robert Reid, Governor of Assam had stated, "The most serious incident in the history of Manipur and its relations with its Hill subjects was the Kuki rebellion it cost 28 lakhs of rupees to quell, and in the course of it many lives were lost."²⁹ L. W. Shakespeare also said that of all the military operations that ever took place, the Anglo-Kuki War of 1917-1919 was the greatest of all.³⁰ The Kukis called it a 'war of independence.'³¹ The Kuki resistance lasted for more than two years and was not confined only to the hill areas of Manipur valley but extended to the un-administered Somra Tract, Thaugdut state of Burma, North Cachar Hills and Naga Hills district of Assam, covering more than 6,000 square miles of rugged hills affecting more than 40,000 Kuki populations.³² The Kuki uprising demolished the myth that Kukis were the collaborators of the British in north east India. It revealed a more stringent fact that the Kukis had actually fought the British in 1857 and inspired by the events of Sepoy rebellion in 1857, members of Sylhet Light Infantry marched through Cachar where they encountered severe opposition from the British army. While fighting the British army they had enlisted a number of Kukis to

offer resistance to the British. Similarly, the events in 1917-1919 were not the end of their resistance to colonial rule.

The brutal suppression of the uprising was not forgotten by the Kukis. They enlisted themselves in the Indian National Army of Subhash Chandra Bose and fought the British during the Second World War in Imphal and Kohima. The Kukis during their uprising of 1917 had not only been able to enlist the support of others like the Tangkhul Nagas but even inspired a Meitei miracle worker to contribute to the movement. It had spread to parts of Burma raising hopes of many to overthrow the British regime and establishing a raj of the natives. The colonial state, however, was not only able to break such intertribal solidarity to isolate the Kukis but even succeeded in creating a permanent chasm between certain Naga and Kuki communities by spreading false stories about Kuki atrocities on these communities during the uprising. It was said that it was only a Thadoe revolt and did not involve other Kukis. It was also said that the movement was not against the British but against the Nagas that gave rise to Naga-Kuki enmity. That the Kukis wanted to overthrow the white regime, resist the Christian missionaries who they believed were out to destroy their faith and culture, that they had an alternate vision of indigenous rule and was restorative of Kuki regime, that it was a Pan-Chin movement spanning across Manipur, Naga hills, Cachar, Assam and Burma and was purely anti-colonial in character, that it was perfectly capable of defeating the British raj with their weaponry –was completely denied. The contemporary accounts of official reports and English newspaper were biased. The Kukis had been thought of as a ‘martial’ race and absolutely ‘loyal’ to the British. The revolt demolished this myth. Therefore the Kuki revolt was called ‘sinister,’ ‘the British could have crushed the rebels in no time had the First World War not been in progress, it was the work of [a] few self-serving chiefs and not all Kukis.’³³ They only highlighted the military operations and successful suppression of the revolt. These texts were truly another set of prose of counterinsurgency. The narratives based on these sources obviously followed the same pattern. Contrary to the belief, the movement was neither spontaneous nor apolitical as theorised by Ranajit Guha about the elementary aspect of such insurgency ‘There was nothing spontaneous³⁴ about all this in the sense of being unthinking and wanting in deliberation. In fact in the Kuki movement, there were elaborate thinking and deliberation before the launch of the movement. The peasants [read tribals] obviously knew what they were doing when they rose in revolt. The fact that this was designed primarily to destroy the authority of the super-ordinate elite and carried no elaborate blueprint for its replacement [in case of Kuki there was] does not put it outside the realm of

politics. On the contrary, insurgency affirmed its political character precisely by its negative procedure. By trying to force a mutual substitution of the dominant and the dominated in the power structure it left nothing to doubt about its own identity as a project of power...that the raj they wanted to substitute for the one they were out to destroy did not quite conform to the mode of a secular and national state and their concept of power failed to rise above localism, sectarianism and ethnicity does not take away from the essentially political character of their activity but defines the quality of that politics by specifying its limitations.”³⁵

It is remarkable that in recent times, many communities in north-east India, big or small, have understood the importance of historiographical practice and are making serious efforts at the reconstruction of their own respective histories. The output has not only succeeded in enriching and diversifying India's past but even challenged the dominance of 'mainstreamist' historiography. Indeed, north-east India hardly ever finds any mention in the textbooks of Indian history, most of which subscribe to the above school. Manipur has been a bit fortunate in this regard. Jawaharlal Nehru's accidental involvement with the Gaidinliu story brought the movement led by Jadonang-Gaidinliu in Manipur into national focus. Similarly, the Kuki and Kacha-Naga uprisings were accorded recognition due to the new found enthusiasm in the idea of 'history from below'. New researches on events such as the Kuki uprising have supplied enough material for the authors of textbooks on Indian history or for a historian working on national history, to include the north-east in their forthcoming volumes.

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