

## Understanding the Problems of Elderly: The Kuki Experience

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### Abstract

Ageing is a natural and universal phenomenon experienced by all sections of the society in all generation and countries. The magnitude of the problems of elderly persons is, however, not the same everywhere but varies from society to society. Human life undergoes a continuous process of transformation from childhood to old age. As a matter of fact, old age encounter human frailty and marginalization of the elderly and finally receded to social oblivion. As such, how well the state and civil society shoulder the responsibility of caring the elderly persons will depend on the appreciation of the pitfall of one life's journey.

This paper focuses on the position of the aged and changes taking place due to various forces among the Kuki community majority of whom has been residing in the hills. No area of life whether it be socio-cultural, polity, economy or religion of the tribal community has been unaffected and untouched by the wind of change. Against this backdrop, study of the elderly problems among the Kukis is attempted taking advantage of my personal knowledge and experience as I belong to the same community.

**Key words:** family, elderly, marginalization, psychosis, militancy, etc.

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### I. INTRODUCTION:

Elderly people commanded respect in the society and in their respective family as they controlled the sources of power, wealth and the fate of their family. However, in the present trend it has been observed that there has been some changes in the society as the new generations perceive a different mental attitude and outlook towards the elders due to the increasing pressures of urbanization, changes in occupation pattern and perhaps due to developing changes in life style too. Today the problems faced by the elderly are increasing all over the world with a varying magnitude and manifestation.

Taking due cognizance of the magnitude of the problems of the elderly, the UN had declared the year 1999 as the International year of the Older Person and October 1, as the Aged People Day for celebrating and acknowledging the contribution of the older people to society. The rapid increase in population of elderly in the world has caught the attention and concern of the UN. It was thought to be a concern of the developing countries but now the issue has become equally important in all the developing countries.

As a matter of fact, even at the international level there is a movement for the welfare of the aged people. Age Demand Action (ADA) is a case in point. It is a grass root campaign to fight against age discrimination. On the day of UN International Day of Older People, activist of all ages across the world take part in marches to make sure their voices are heard. They lobby their government on issues that affect older people such as pension, health care, housing or access to work. Through the grassroots of ADA, a global movement is growing that is pushing the international community for a convention on the rights of older people. The ADA campaign has been going since 2007 and has garnered some high profile support and had some great impact.<sup>1</sup>

### LIFE OF THE AGED IN THE HILLS OF MANIPUR:

There are very few studies on the aged in tribal areas. Life of the aged among the tribes inhabiting the surrounding hills of Manipur in one way can be said to be better than that of urban areas due to the presence of a strong community feeling. However, the tribal societies are also undergoing rapid changes in the recent decades. Opening up of tribal areas through expansion of communication facilities, government policies and measures ushering in economic changes and the entry of market economy, embracing of Christianity and growth of modern education are transforming the lifestyle, mental outlook and attitude of the tribal communities.

**Aged participation in the work force.** Significant contribution is being rendered by the elderly tribal man and woman to the family in the field of economic pursuits. An aged individual goes on working as long as he or she is fit enough. Almost all the aged man and woman didn't stay idle at home unless compelled by the able bodied

family member. Aged Kukis in the village take goats and cattle for grazing, sell items in the weekly markets, go for fishing, and undertake agricultural and other types of labour all the year round. They also attend to works like watching crops, weeding, harvesting, drying various items under the sun and guarding them, rope making, basket making, taking care of the children etc. Aged females help their family in cooking, grinding, and taking food items to those working in the fields and forests. Aged woman spend more time with their children than aged man comparatively. This does not mean that aged man simply take rest or stay idly at home unless some physical ailment restricts them. There is practically no leisure time activity as individual continues to do some useful work or other all the time. Those confined to home also try to do some light work of useful nature. Transition from active work to no work comes gradually over a period of time as they become weak and infirm, with failing eyesight and other age related problems. Then they withdrew from outdoor work to household work like taking care of the children and infants which often is more difficult and tiresome hastening their complete collapse. In most societies the absence of elderly is felt more so in the tribal family where both husband and wife go out for work. Many young couples are going to various places in search of seasonal agricultural labour and sometime event to the extent of bonded labour. Such families had no option and so had to entrust their aged grandparents to look after their houses, properties etc. as they are dependable. Life of the aged in the hills is miserable. Let by a life of hand to mouth, many elderly people often concealed their physical illness unless it is unbearable. They had a hard time bearing the pains hoping that it gets naturally cured which most often turn out to be a major ailment or disaster due to lack of timely medical attention. When the family could not afford to take to dispensaries and hospital they are simply left to their own fate. An aged Kuki work until and unless they totally lose their strength and potentiality. Various Kuki villages in the hills were inter-connected by means of foot path which is muddy during rainy season and dusty during dry season. Even minimum requirement of transport and communication facilities were not attended. The chief means of transport in the river is raft. Till today in the interior part of the hill villages, primitive system of transportation is practiced by using a sledge pulled by buffaloes.

**Kuki Family system.** While the concept of joint family system among the Manipuri Meitei is gradually eroding<sup>2</sup> the system practice among the Kukis is neither purely joint family nor nuclear family. As a custom the younger son (s) established a separate dwelling house either within the same village or outside after their marriage. The eldest son by law of primogeniture had the legal and customary right to inherit the family assets and properties both immovable and movable. The eldest has the right to exercise authority over all family affairs and had to shoulder the responsibility of looking after their parents. With a near subsistence economy joint household where parents and married son living together becomes rare. Even in a small family where there are just only two brothers, they will stay separate soon after their marriage. There are many reasons behind this separation. While it is also custom-bound another reason is to avoid clashes between the two daughter-in-laws who came from different family background. Once official separation between the eldest son (Mi-upa) and his younger brothers is done, the aged parent cannot die in the house of younger sons. Here come the big role and responsibility of the wife of Mi-upa to look after the interest and well-being of her in-laws. She is expected to show her love and concern like her own biological parents. But most often the aged poor fellows are ill-treated, neglected, and abused both verbally and physically by her daughter-in-law and other members of the family. This sort of ill treatment does not always come to the knowledge of their sons as they have no opportunity to complain. Surprisingly, in the event of quarrel or misunderstanding over certain matters between his mother and wife he would most often take the side of the latter without proper enquiry. All these accumulated grievances boomerang into a big family disputes in the long run. It is very unfortunate that they lived a life of misery and die without peace of mind. Further, economic independence and establishment of separate family relieve the youngsters from their obligations towards the aged. This affects the quality of life among the aged.

**Local and outside migration.** Most of the educated and employed Kukis migrate in the urban areas for reason of their official posting, convenience, comfort, accessing to modern city amenities, etc. Even many of the Kuki chiefs have also shifted to urban areas whom I called Non-Resident Chief (NRC)<sup>3</sup> leaving the administration of their respective villages to their younger brother or nearest relatives. This new elite groups are happy and contented and their children also adapt well in the new changed environment. But their aged parents would prefer to stay in their native village in the midst of near and dear ones and the friendly environment which they are accustomed to.

Besides, working parents settling outside the state have practically lost contacts with their aged mothers and fathers. This being a yearly affair, aged parents in the long run lost not only emotional attachment but also the joy, love, affection and care of their children which they don't deserve. Even when their children pay annual visit to their native homes and village, they became like a guest if not strangers. When aged parents attempted to stay where their sons are working, they cannot cope with it as they encounter hostile and unfriendly

environments, hot and humid climate and an un-adjustable food. Besides, travelling to and fro outside the state also became an expensive affair as it drained away their meager income of three to four months provisions. Being simple cultivator and farmer by profession they love the smell of natural vegetation, paddy field, fresh air, muddy roads and community life of the village. As such they prefer to die in a place where they have spent the most fruitful years of their life.

This unavoidable separation is in fact very painful for the elderly persons as they led a life of loneliness reducing them to the status of destitution. They are deprived of the pleasure of playing with them and were made to miss them dearly. At home they are left sometime at the mercy of the maid servants and helpers. They have limited opportunity to meet their friends and relatives because of limited mobility due to ill health and lack of conveyance.

**Financial problems.** Most of the elderly people among the Kuki community do not have a regular income. Educated and retired government servants are very few among the Kuki community. As such they are completely dependent on their sons and daughters. Some of the aged octogenarians consist of ex-servicemen and Indian National Army veterans. For those retired governments servants they may enjoy their pension but while most aged Kukis are illiterate and have never been employed under any state governments. For them life became very boring and frustrating when they lose their earning capacity. For every expense they go on demanding to their sons and daughters who are not always co-operative. Family economic activities are being replaced by individual earnings through wage labour giving the younger generations the freedom to ignore their obligations towards the elderly.

Consequently, they feel very depressed and look older than their real age. In spite of the Government of India's initiative for welfare measures of the elderly, like old age pension scheme they have not benefitted practically due to poor and ineffective implementation. With regard to financial needs the scene in the remote hill areas is different. Unlike the aged people in urban areas, the aged Kukis living in the interior parts of the hills has very few wants. This is a great financial relief for them and for their family. They are satisfied with the simple foods and whatever clothes they have.

**Impact of ethnic conflict and insurgency.** Manipur is fast emerging as the hotbed of militancy. Due to the prevailing law and order situation and the unforgettable bitter memories of Kuki-Naga clashes in the 1990s, the elderly Kukis do not have peace of mind. Many Kuki youths have been claimed by this ethnic conflict and insurgency. As fear psychosis and insecurity loom large, it became the source of stress and anxiety for them.

While talking about the life of the elderly Kukis, it is worth mentioning about the insurgency related death of innocent Kukis which continue to haunt them mentally. During the past four decades beginning from 1950s till 1990s on account of the NSCN (IM) led atrocities more than 900 innocent Kukis from various parts of Manipur, Nagaland and Assam had been killed, 351 villages uprooted leading to displacing of 10,000 families of 50,000 population.<sup>4</sup> The Kukis who had settled in the interior part of the hills were the most affected in this so-called 'ethnic cleansing war'. With the attack on their villages, and the subsequent gruesome killing and loss of precious lives, Kukis had to vacate their villages. In such fallen state of humanity, their life became very threatening. Due to the prevailing fear psychosis and a feeling of insecurity in the hills they had to leave however hard it might be. Unable to survive the pangs of misery smaller villages follow suit. Thus, the Kukis were internally displaced till today. The elderly woes multiplied in such great magnitude.

As this ethnic crisis has not been contained till date there is apprehension in the minds of the Kukis more so the aged ones that it may flare-up again in future at any moment. Consequently, the Kuki youths have been forced to turn to militancy in order to protect their villages on account of Naga aggression. The Kuki militants in due course of time amass arms and ammunitions but they have been mercilessly hounded by security forces resulting further loss of precious lives.

The elderly woes do no end here. The mushrooming of different insurgent groups among the ethnic Kukis gradually culminating into clan based organization has many negative impacts. Different Kuki tribes are now in 'strive-torn' condition with enmity, suspicion, tension, mutual distrust, and factionalism among themselves. Incidence of coup, attack and counter-attack among themselves became very common resulting in the loss of lives. Many of them have no clear cut ideology. In this regard insurgency has emerged as the fastest means to earn easy money. The existence of fake groups and cadres points out as to how lucrative they have become. Most of the fake cadres were mostly school drop-outs, drug addicts, children from broken homes, petty criminals in the village, etc.<sup>5</sup> As such the existence of too many parallel governments is felt everywhere. It

appears that militants groups seemed to have maintained the philosophy of violence at the initial stage of their formation as they wanted to be in the limelight among the public and their militant counterpart. Most often they make their presence felt by indulging in the politics of violence taking its own toll. As such violence has steadily increased in the state in recent years. Extortion is rampant. All these widespread incidences of violence and extortion do have its impact on the developmental activities and the common people have to bear the brunt of this. Incidence of insurgency related violence is so common in the hills of Manipur that it threatened the fabric of our normal lives. Planting of landmines in the Kuki inhabited areas of Chandel district termed as 'terrorist act' and the losses of human lives and limbs leading to anger, death, displacement and marginalization posed a threat to their very existence.<sup>6</sup> The callous and insensitive attitude of the government over this horrifying incident has increased the suffering of the affected people. The psychological trauma of the elderly people too increased manifold. So the prevailing law and order situation certainly is the cause of worry which in turn became the source of stress, fear psychosis, anxiety, tension, nervousness etc.

The state government has utterly failed to contain this problem. It also failed to protect the loyal and innocent citizens resulting in the large scale human rights violation perpetrated by the government law enforcing forces on the one hand and the non-state actors on the others. There is no freedom of speech and movement. Villagers are beaten irrespective of age by the security forces on the one hand and the militants on the other. The already chaotic life-style and the consequent miserable lives of the young and aged Kuki was more compounded in the recent past with the entry of the valley based militants in the hill areas predominantly inhabited by Kukis. Life in the hill district is miserable and existence under tension-free and peaceful atmosphere in next to impossible. Therefore, the loss of innocent lives in such magnitude over the years had great impact especially upon the psycho-social and health related problems of the affected elderly families. The usual practice is that children have to perform the funeral rites of their parents but in Manipur today it is the other way round. Many elderly persons are looking after parentless children. Grieving for the untimely loss of their near and dear relatives in ethnic crisis and insurgency related violence has great impact upon the health of the elderly as they are the most vulnerable section of the society. Especially the Thadou-Kuki community is at the receiving end in this problem ridden insurgency and trouble torn state of Manipur.

The cry of the Kukis for paternal generosity, however did not receive any proper attention as could be evidenced from the fact that the matter remains unattended till date. Thus, the Kukis faced innumerable hardships of all sorts. Their economy was seriously affected. They became landless and were reduced to a mere wage earner or hire-labourer, which was hitherto unknown in the past. This shows that they have no other source of income other than land, as land is the only means of eking out their livelihood. In fact, the increasing landless labourers are closely connected with poverty. Therefore, economic instability is finally leading to mass impoverisation of Kuki society leading to all sorts of malnutrition irrespective of age.

**General food habit of Kuki people.** As the saying goes 'you are what you eat' one should eat healthy food and live healthy life. In the hills fruits and green leafy vegetables are available in plenty. They are the best source of antioxidants. Its consumption either reduced or prevents old age ailments like hypertension, heart disease and diabetes. In spite of its usefulness to one's health it is not in the knowledge of most aged people. Many of the aged are averse to eating sour and citrus fruits. The traditional food habit of the Kuki people generally consists of starchy local rice, fresh and smoked dried meat, and vegetables like fish, yam, pumpkins, maize, millets, beans, brinjal, chilly, lady's finger, tomato, mustard leaf, etc. The use of spices and edible oil is a recent phenomenon<sup>7</sup>. They consumed a lot of salt and hot chilly locally known as *malchapom*. Even my own father consumed unadvisable quantity of salt. Traditionally brewed local rice beer was consume in great quantity but now most aged Kuki has given up after the arrival of Christianity though it is still practice among some tribes. Different types of birds like hornbill, kite, pigeon, parrots, mammals etc. are hunted for domestic consumption and sometime for sale. The typical dish of Kuki people is **changpah-me**, **sizou mepoh** and **thingthupi** which can be taken by all age. Meat and green leafy vegetable are the main item of *changpah-me*. It is also good for the toothless aged people. It is prepared by putting some amount of rice in the curry pot where meat or vegetable leaves are put and then properly stirred with a bamboo spoon. There are some toothless people<sup>8</sup> whose hardened gums can even chew meat. They are blessed with all sorts of food by nature. In a way agricultural and forest products are the main source of economy and serve as the backbone of the society too.

**Common ailments of the elderly people.** There is a plethora of complaint among the aged tribal about their sickness and ageing problems. Their health deteriorates when they are not able to enjoy the normal food. Symptom of ailments generally prevalent among the aged tribal are cataract, giddiness, wrinkles, loss of memory, dim and blurring vision, hearing problem, joint problem, loss of teeth and toothache, back pain, absent mindedness, crooked body, gastrointestinal problems like peptic ulcer, indigestion, constipation, piles and

dysentery, loss of hair, vein problem, support of stick while walking, crack feet with filthy clothes, chewing fermented tobacco leaves locally prepared with repulsive smell accompanied by respiratory problem, and so on. Of course, the above general health conditions are also the major health problems among the aged in northeastern region. Unlike health problems among the aged people living in urban areas where diabetes is a major health problem it is not so common among the aged Kukis in the past since they have been physically working all through their life. In this connection, it is to state that most of the tribal people living in the remote part of the state with hilly terrain have been practicing shifting cultivation which requires intensive labour. But surprisingly in recent times even among the aged tribal especially among the retired government employees and Christian mission workers like pastors, and his co-workers, diabetes became one of the serious health problem. Being busy with their tight schedule in connection with their pastoral ministry within and outside their parish and other ecclesiastical matters they hardly perform any physical work unlike the workaholic fellow tribal in the hills. Further, most mission workers enjoyed the privileges of being welcome by the members of their church denomination everywhere with due respect and love. They are an important guest wherever they pay visit and the local church members used to serve them well with the best delicious items such as pork, beef, chicken and fish along with milk-tea with a high amount of sugar. They were ignorant of their health so much so that they didn't take care even when symptoms of various diseases persist. They have to pay the price of their ignorance as diabetes does not spare anyone. By the time they retire from active mission work they are battling this problem till their last breath.

**Health care scenario.** The missionaries introduced the Kukis to modern health care system. In 1945, William Pettigrew established a hospital and a leper's asylum at Kangpokpi which are located in the Senapati district of Manipur. The Catholic Church has dispensaries in most of its 31 Parish Centres for the health care of the people. People have learnt to look after their physical bodies and dresses better and they have improved the sanitary facilities around their homes. The little scientific knowledge they have learnt has its roots in Christianity. Tablets and syrups supplied by the missionaries have worked instant miracles among the unyielding tribals because of the faith and beliefs of the medicine and doctors. It convinced them that the new religion was indeed beneficial.<sup>9</sup> Pettigrew was in fact serving both as a missionary and doctor to the people.

In this connection let us have a quick reflection with regard to the mindset of the Kuki people before the coming of Christianity. The tribal world was filled with fears and phobias of the cosmic reality. Every illness was thought to be an act of the revengeful gods and spirits. Hence they had to propitiate them through animal sacrifices to keep them pleased. The Kukis are superstitious by nature. They believed that certain places such as big trees, rocks, thick forests, riversides, and graveyards were the abode of demons and responded to them with great fear. Brackish springs were believed to be the abode of demons and were prohibited for cultivation. They observed different kinds of taboos in order to attain a good life in this world. Their lives were bound with the fear of superstitions. The fears and superstition are no longer seen, mainly because the Kuki people can now pray to God whenever they feel afraid or uncomfortable. L. Jeyaseelan notes that stillbirths and twin-births were regarded as a bad omen to parents among the Kuki-Chin-Mizo groups.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, they followed elaborate rituals to appease those spirits causing such tragedies of life. The practice of offering food to the spirit of the dead has been removed by the gospel of Christ as the people now understand that human spirits do not roam the earth. Christians began to condole with the grieving families and the church extended humanitarian measures by giving firewood, clothing, rice, sugar, salt and money, according to the ability of the mourners.

In spite of all these qualitative changes, majority Kukis normally take very little care of their health. Very often they ignored their diseases. They rely on natural herbs for treating various ailments. For instance they drink boiled water prepared out of guava leaves in case of stomach pain, for pile they drink the boiled water of tree beans, for cough they ate ginger and so on. They have their own traditional method of therapy. Certain organs of animals like the teeth of tiger, the horn of rhino, the python's gall bladder, etc. are used while treating the patient with various ailments. Even after embracing Christianity still they have a strong tendency to believe that unknown cause of sickness is the work of some evil force for which they often go to those who practice herbal treatment instead of trained medical practitioner. The medicine man also uses various items like the bones of animal for treating the patient<sup>11</sup>. This sort of practice involve killing of animal mostly dogs and treating the patient with its organ - the gall bladder in combination with some other items like tiger's bones, python's gallbladder, elephant and rhino's teeth, etc.

They have no knowledge of geriatric medicines as it is never made available in the village. No one have done a diagnostic study of geriatric care in the hills. Those available in the towns and cities are beyond the reach to the poor people. The sickly aged people feel neglected and overlook by their family and the society. As

such, depressed geriatric patients are on the rise. One could sense the feeling of neglect and marginalization running among the people of remote Kuki areas which merit the Government's attention.

The role of Catholic Christian priests, nuns and the community at large in promoting health care services and paying attention to the health of elderly people is commendable. They provide humanitarian services by running schools, dispensaries and hospitals. They also encouraged youth and women association and other like-minded civil bodies to cater to the problems and needs of the elderly people. But among the protestant churches their role in promoting health care services either for general public or the aged is very minimal unlike the Catholic Christian.

Kuki people generally finds difficult in changing their lifestyle and food habits even when they grow old. They will go to hospitals only when they are seriously sick and traditional method of treating the disease do not work. In fact poor dietary habits, poverty, lack of accessible medical facilities in terms of doctor and health centre continued to play as a major setback and consequently shortened their life span. Christianity generally improved the conditions of the poor, orphans, destitute, handicapped and other marginalized section of different Kuki communities. Christianity brought unprecedented blessings to the Kuki community as a whole. The gospel of Jesus Christ transformed the spiritual life of the Kukis and wipe out the demonic powers which were once supposed to control their physical and spiritual existence at large. It invalidates and nullifies their superstitious beliefs.

However, traditionally unhygienic as they were the Kukis in many of the remote villages continue to be dirty and filthy and the way they live close to domesticated animals like pigs and buffaloes were repulsive and degrading. As they were ignorant they hardly care about their health. As such it is not the 'life style diseases' but epidemics used to take a heavy toll of lives especially children and the aged ones. The iodine deficiency disorder namely goitre unlike the remote past is very less in the present Kuki society. Nevertheless, elderly people are more susceptible to infections, and maximum death occurs as a results of respiratory tract infection particularly *bronchopneumonia*. Most of the old people cannot take care of their daily need. Environment and personal hygiene of the aged needs to be addressed. In spite of the advancement in medical sciences, ignorant villagers continue to suspect that many deaths and sickness is caused by evil spirits locally call 'kaose.' The work of the kaose is known as 'kholailang.'<sup>12</sup> Even those people living along National Highway-39 near the foothills of Koubru, often turned to herbalist and those who practice traditional treatment.

**Old age home: Paradoxical to Kuki way of life.** Many Kuki intelligentsias are of the opinion that the identity and culture of the Kuki people is slowly vanishing. Yet their ethical values, norms, sustainable cultural practices, language and customs are to be promoted and preserve in any case. As such, respect and caring for the elderly people is a culture for the Kuki society as well.

In analyzing these practices, it is alien in concept as far as the Kuki society is concerned. In the event of setting up such type of institution among the Kukis it will likely evoke strong protest and sharp criticism from different sections of the society. It will be perhaps be the beginning of conflict within the family. Many express their fear of cultural dislocation. The aged Kukis will strongly disapprove as the Kuki society has strong social support system. In the event of introducing Old age Home among the Kukis, there is strong apprehension that in the long run even their sons and daughter may not come to attend the funeral ceremony of their aged parents as they may take the liberty to entrust the whole business to the caretaker of Old Age Home. Due to certain factors like increasing urbanization, changing role of daughter-in-laws, growing individualism, stress and strain, financial constraint etc. it may not be surprising to envisage the setting up of such type of institution. Further, in spite of having its own cultural dynamic, with the ever increasing busy schedule due to socio-economic-educational pressure many parents and children do not have adequate time to pay attention to the problems and needs of their old parents.

However, it should be considered only as a secondary option under exceptional circumstances. Under no pretext should the aged be made to feel that they are a burden and hence turned away. At the same time we have to understand and also accept the fact that the role of family as a social safety net for the elderly began to erode in Kuki society too. There were many instances where daughter-in-laws are kicking out their aged in-law(s) and made to die like dogs in a pathetic condition. In such case old age home may be an evil necessity. Aged people among the poor family became more vulnerable. Thus, even in Kuki society a time is coming whereby they should gear up to meet this challenge. In that context old age home may be required that too only when the younger generation do not have the time or resources to meet the needs of aged parents such as medical expenses, special food etc.

**Age discrimination.** It's what happens when older people are not treated as well as other age groups in the society. This age discrimination has many faces and happens everywhere in the world. In spite of the fact that old people have accumulated wealth of wisdom and experiences the result is that older people are forgotten in the society. In the same way unlike traditional Kuki society, the voice of the Kuki elders is not heard. The Kuki society needs to uphold the old value system. The traditional Kuki society had an in-built protection and security for older persons to live a longer life. But regrettably modernization and a host of other factors have displaced the elderly from their elderly status and places. Monetization of the society further made the elderly to lose the former enviable position. Since one's wealth becomes a measure of success and influence, the rich are consulted to advise the community on every important matter that requires elderly advice. In my village Tuipajang near Saparmeina- Sadar Hills, for instance, old age is no longer synonymous with wisdom. Unless you are a money bag, nobody will listen to your opinion at a village meeting, your old age notwithstanding. The role of elders in the village council chaired by the chief has also got eroded with the advent of post-modernism. Young Kuki chief did things whimsically with total disregards of the elders' advice. Age discrimination must end. We should know that older people still have a lot to give to the life of the society. They should not be excluded from active participation in the human community.

**An Over-view of the problem:**

The manifold problems of the aged are therefore, biological and physiological, absence of health care facilities in remote areas, poor nutritional care, psychological trauma due to lack of affection, elderly abuses, sense of insecurity due to prevailing law and order situation, internal displacement, changes of value system and norms etc. Healthy aging is therefore not simply related to the advances in medical sciences and technology but also to a wide range of other factors like enabling the aged to lead a stimulating life by being fully involved in the society and having meaningful social relationship with his fellow being. Even in the conservative Kuki society the problems of the elderly are on the rise as the society itself is undergoing various changes. The contradiction between traditional values and the values of modernity has aggravated the problems of the elderly people. Traditionally the family took care of the old parents but due to rapid urbanization and the exodus of people from village to town and cities and to metropolitan cities, it created a vicious situation. Losing their ability to earn and with no family support coming forth the aged are put to the status of destitution. Migrating to distant cities in search of greener pasture as a trend *per se* is appreciated but the effect on the elder is unwelcome reality. The elderly people are being demoralized when their children failed to understand their age related problem. Due to lack of health care system, diet and nutrition the number of 80+ old Kuki is very few when compared to a few advanced society whose large proportion of older people live with good health status and without significant mental or physical decline. The absence of a safety net for the aged among the Kuki society has exacerbated the problem.

**Easing the problems:** The dream of the people all over the world to live long life is now becoming a reality. This is due to socio-economic development of people and advancement of sciences especially medical sciences. In India about 7.5% of the population is above 60 years and the life expectancy is gradually increasing.<sup>13</sup> In Manipur the aged Kuki people are one of the most marginalized and vulnerable communities. It is essential to recommend special intervention programmes to improve the health of the elderly. It warrants the implementation of a special health care strategy to reduce their suffering at this crucial age and improve the quality of life.

**Containment of militancy.** There is a causal relationship between the psychological trauma of the elderly Kukis and impact of insurgency due to violation of human rights in different forms. The impact of ethnic conflict and insurgency upon the minds of the elderly Kukis has never been addressed. The ongoing armed conflict situation prevalent in Manipur among different groups of tribal community has aggravated the cycle of violence. Gripped by the constant fear of militant related violence in the hills left alone the violation human rights by security forces, there has never been peace of mind among the elderly Kukis. They were saddened at the fact that different Kuki groups are engaging in perpetual enmity. By indulging in the politics of violence there has been heavy casualty of young Kuki lives in recent years. Without peace every achievement comes to nothing. This merits the attention of churches, civil organizations, NGOs and the Government agencies in maintaining law and order. Thus, the elderly person among the Kuki society is apparently the most vulnerable group in the context of Manipur which needs to be addressed. In a way at this juncture the Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement signed between the government and Kuki Underground group is a welcome development. As of now, incidence of violence has greatly been minimized. After this not only the aged but the general public too heaved a sigh of great relief. Besides, rehabilitation of internally displaced Kukis and compensation of the victims might ensure better chance of peace in the hill areas.

**Day care centres.** Day care centre should be set up wherever feasible to enhance general health and well being of frail and socially isolated older people to enjoy friendly environment. It encourages people to use and share their skill with others as well as learn new skills. Aged Kuki people are mostly illiterate. The literate ones also could hardly read Bible scriptures and church hymns. They love listening radios, watching television and cinemas. A variety of recreational facilities and other programmes such as relaxation exercises, playing games and cards, memory games etc. could be included. This will relieve them from their loneliness and boredom.

**Health care services.** Health care facilities should be widespread and made functional especially in the hill areas of Manipur. There are enough reasons to believe that that the elderly are at increased risk for adverse emotional effects in the wake of ethnic clash. Depression and other forms of distress among the elderly are readily overlooked, in part because they may not take on exactly the same symptom pattern as among younger people. For instance, disorientation, memory loss, and distractibility may be signs of depression in the elderly. The elderly are also more vulnerable to being victimized. In the context of increased stress on the family and community, meeting their special needs may take on a lowered priority. One particular issue that may appear is feelings that they have lost their entire life (loss of children, hearth and homes, memorabilia) and that, due to their age, there is not enough time left in their life to rebuild and recreate. The elderly are also more likely to be physically disabled. Therefore, psycho-social issues should be given priority.

**Economic security.** Economic security is to be assured to them. Aged widows and widower having no issue, unmarried aged man and woman should be properly provided the needed old age pension. Financial needs should integrate with other issues like psychological, social and health.

**Adult education programme.** Adult education programmes need to be intensified and strengthened because an educated person has more self confidence and emotional stability than an illiterate. In remote Kuki villages due to poverty illiteracy is high and more among the aged.

**Adhering to traditional norms – ‘Khankho’.** It is the norms by which a person conduct his or her life in the interest of the other, i.e, those whom you come into interaction with, in short, the wider community. It is similar to Mizo’s *lawmngaihna*. Every tribal community has certain ethical norms which govern the principle of life in the community. It is a reciprocal goodwill relationship between two individuals, groups, clans, and tribes. So when every member of the community functions in consonance with the various duties of these relationships there is peace and harmony. Misunderstanding between person to person or between the old and the young at the level of an individual can be greatly minimized. A very enlightening thing about **Khankho** is its consonance with the gospel message proclaimed by Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>

**Role of the society towards the elders:** The lost of societal value system and historical sense among the younger generation is also attributable to a system of life that has marginalized and isolated older people and that hampers dialogue between the latter and younger generations. One of the most painful dimensions of this marginalization is lack of human relation. Most often they are not only deprived of family and societal contact but also but also suffer abandonment, loneliness, and isolation. And as their interpersonal and social contacts diminished so their lives are correspondingly impoverished. They are deprived of the intellectual and cultural stimulus and enrichment they need. Therefore, they should be given the opportunity to participate actively in the life of the community. Steps must also be taken to accommodate representation of the aged and remove the prejudices and misconception, which have spoiled the good image of the elders. Forums and associations like Kuki Senior Citizen forum and such other type are very welcoming and should be encouraged. Even in the most popular cultural festivals like Kut, participation of elders is found lacking. Cultural festivals like Kut are encouraged by the government to preserve and promote Chin-Kuki-Mizo identity but as of now it almost turn into a festival of rock concert, fashion show and beauty pageant. Aged Kukis who are the storehouse of knowledge when it comes to traditions and customs are being seemingly marginalized and their voices are not properly heard even in such cultural festivals.

**Role of the Church towards the elders:** Since almost all the Kukis have embraced Christianity the role of the church towards the elders is very great. It may be noted that most aged Kukis locked into themselves and self marginalized thus accelerating the process of their own physical and mental deterioration. The Kuki society needs to situate old age in the context of a precise providential scheme of God who is love. Only in the light of faith strengthened by the hope which does not deceive (Rom. 5:5) shall we be able to accept old age in a truly Christian way both as a gift and a task. That is the secret of youthfulness of the spirit, which we can



continue to cultivate in spite of the passing of years. Pastors who are imbued with humanity and spirituality should respond to the social, cultural and spiritual needs of the older people. Practice of Godly character and other related religious activities occupies a key place in easing the problems of the elderly Kukis. The following points may be considered indispensable.

- i) By participating in prayer meeting with their fellow Christians and sharing their life they will understand more and more that the Lord is not uncaring and not indifferent to human sorrow or their personal difficulties they encounter in their life. Thus, it is the duty of the church to give chance to participate in prayer meeting and make their life more meaningful. The **Hallelujah Prayer Band** and the **Kuki Nampi Taona (KNT)** are a prayer organization which accommodates all people irrespective of age. Many aged men and women are participating in this prayer fellowship and they are very happy and comfortable with it. My mother **Vahhat Kipgen**, aged about 80 years is also a regular prayer partner in this organization and no one can stop her from participating in this fellowship in spite of her old age.
- ii) As older people have enough spiritual and mental energy they should be allowed to preach the gospel and be witnesses to Christian life. They can be made permanent deacons in the church.
- iii) During trials, illness and suffering pastoral care should be provided to ensure that the aged people do not feel useless and a burden. They should be helped to accept their sufferings as a means of encouraging the mystery of God and of man.
- iv) The aged must be integrated without any discrimination into the Church activities and conferences. No one should be deprived of the grace of God, the preaching of the word in the church or religious gatherings or the witnesses of charity.
- v) Step should also be taken to ensure their involvement in religious programmes like retreats, spiritual exercise like revival programme, crusade etc. Attending church and other related programme help in reducing stress and help them to develop positive attitude which in turn boost their immune system.
- vi) Those infirm and disabled should also involve in spiritual care through prayer and communion. This testifies the inalienable value of life.
- vii) Prayer, human comfort and humanitarian measures should be extended to the terminally ill member of the church.

Thus, the richness in humanity and wisdom of older people still has a great deal to offer to the church and to society. To accompany older people to approach them and to enter into relation and engaged in a meaningful dialogue with them is the duty of all of us. Various Kuki churches existing among the Kuki community must strive to help their aged persons to live their own life in the light of faith and to rediscover in it the value of the resources that they are still able and still have a responsibility to place at the services of others.

Besides, re-employment of retired people, voluntary services of resourceful elderly people, useful engagement of the aged in the field of writing, translating, and counseling will be very good for them. This would perhaps minimize their feeling on anxiety, psychological trauma, insecurity, isolation, frustration, depression, and would keep them physically as well as mentally healthy to enhance the quality of life. They had to live with dignity and respect.

## II.CONCLUSION:

The society wrongly marginalize old people because it evaluate the intrinsic dignity of old people by the goods they could produce or services they could render, forgetting that the dignity of old people transcends goods and services. So, why do we marginalize old people? Old people ought to be surrounded with affection. The elder is an educator and guidance of the young. They never lose their relevance in the family and the society. The elderly and young ought to engage in interactive and productive intercourse. We must change our newly imbibed prejudices against old age and old people. Life is a matter of mutual respect and benefit. Nobody is a useless consumer or a social parasite. Both the elderly people and the young are partners in progress. Life is a matter of mutual assistance and benefit. Both the old and young are needed in the society to support one another. Our elderly people are now being marginalized. There was no question of isolation of older people because they played an indispensable role in the building of the traditional community. But today things have changed. The elderly people need us as much we need them. So we must not allow them to suffer at the fag end of their life.

## NOTES:

- [1]. Access on internet in the subject on Age Discrimination – 15/11/20
- [2]. Sheikhoahao Kipgen & Benjamin Nattar (ed.): Ageing in Northeast Manipur Perspective ICSSR, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi. 2009, (Hereafter cited as **S. Kipgen & Benjamin Nattar**) p.118

- [3]. Sheikho hao Kipgen's **Political and Economic History of the Kukis of Manipur**, Unpublished Ph. D. thesis submitted to Manipur University, Deptt. of History, 2006, p. 281.
- [4]. **The plight of Indigenous Kuki People, Unraveling the story of Deception, Suppression and Marginalization in the Tri Border Areas of India, Myanmar & Bangladesh.** Published by Kuki Movement for Human Rights, 2009, p. 98.
- [5]. J. B. Bhattacharjee (ed.): **Roots of Insurgency in Northeast India**, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2007, p.53.
- [6]. Ngamkhohao Haokip & Michael Lunminthang (ed.); **Kuki Society Past Present, Future.** Kuki Research Forum's Publication through Maxford Books, New Delhi, 2011, p. 328.
- [7]. S. Kipgen & Benjamin Nattar, op.cit. p. 95.
- [8]. While visiting many Kuki villages, I have come across many elderly Kukis without teeth. They have not taken care of their teeth and so they suffered unbearable toothache. When the pain is severe they remove it one after another and so they became toothless even in the early part of their life. Most Kuki elders used to have a very bad mouth smell. When all the teeth is removed they try eating soft things in the beginning and later on switch over to harder stuff either meat or any other things appealing to them. In this way they unbelievably hardened their gum and in the long run they are used to it. Pi, **Deiting Kipgen**, aged about 70 years of Tuipajang village near Saparmeina, Sadar Hills, had tooth problem very early in her life and removed them all. She had no problem in taking food and chewing meat except the bones. She led a life without teeth for the last 25 years or so. Even if her family advises her for making an artificial one she refuses as she is comfortable and fine with it. Interfaced with her on 01/02/11.
- [9]. Cited from *Impact of Christianity on the Tribal Society of Manipur* - a paper presented by Dr L. Jeyaseelan Principal Catholic School, Canchipur in a seminar organized by Manipur University Tribal Students' Union (MUTSU) at Manipur University, in the year 1999.
- [10]. L. Jeyaseelan, 1996, **Impact of Missionary Movement in Manipur**, New Delhi, Interjeet Sharma, p.153.
- [11]. Unfortunately many ignorant Kuki villages will always suspect all unknown cause of sickness to be the work of evil spirit. Whenever they fall sick instead of going to trained medical doctor they will go to those person who combined herbs and other items like the tiger's teeth, python's teeth and gall bladder, elephant teeth, wild boar's teeth, rhino's teeth and also the gall bladder of the animals killed such as dog, pig, cock, etc. Pu Ngamkhopao popularly known as Ngampu aged about 70 years of Tuipajang village is a well-known herbalist and quack. He is an expert in treating those suffering from the work of evil spirit called kaose inclusive of both inkao (home spirit) and gamkao (jungle spirits). He treated many sick people whose cause of illness is believed to be the work of evil spirit. In spite of Christianity many Kuki villagers residing in the hills still believe in the work of this evil spirit and very often resorted to this practice. While interviewing Pu Ngampu on 19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2020 at his residence, he said that he has many patients or clients coming from various parts of the state. He claimed to have cured many of his clients from their ailments by using different items mentioned herein. According to him this sort of practices is not contradictory to the teaching of the gospel or Christianity.
- [12]. In local term 'kao' means 'spirit' and 'se' means 'bad' and so 'kaose' means bad or evil spirit. The work of this evil spirit is called *Kholailang*. Literally 'kho' means 'village' and 'lailang' means 'innerside' of the village. If the word is broken up it has no much sense. But when it is joined together it refers to the work of unseen evil force which is believed to make a person either sick or to behave in an abnormal way. Superstitious as they are many sicknesses are believed to have caused by *Kholailang*. Many symptomatic illnesses may show signs similar to that of *Kholailang* but it is not always the work of this unseen evil spirit. On many occasions ignorant Kuki villagers mistook it as *Kholailang* and in attempting to chase out the evil spirit from the victim body he or she may be subject to torture in the form of beating on the face sometime with blunt object, cutting the victim's hair, etc. Even for the death of newly born babies, *kaose* is blamed.
- [13]. S. Kipgen & Benjamin Nattar, op.cit. p. 15.
- [14]. Cited from a paper – **Khankhology A study of socio political religio-cultural norms of the Kuki people** written by Dr Hemkhochon Chongloi and published by Trulock Theological Seminary, Imphal, in a book titled "**An Emerging Tribal Theology from Kuki Perspective**" edited by Mr. L. Seikholen, 2011, pp. 87-88.

Dr Sheikho hao Kipgen. "Understanding the Problems of Elderly: The Kuki Experience." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 26(02), 2021, pp. 08-17.