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XENOPHOBIC ELEMENTS REFLECTED IN EASTERINE KIRE'S DISCOURSE: UNDERVALUING AND DEPRECIATING OTHERS' CULTURAL AFFINITY PRONE TO BACKFIRE

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Abstract: Nagaland, situated in the Northeastern region of India, became the 16th state of India on 1 December 1963. As per the Census (conducted in 2011), the state which has a total area of 16,579 square kilometers, has a population of 1,980,602, making it one of the smallest states of India. Easterine Kire, a renowned Naga writer who is known to write the first Naga novel in English, is a prominent personality who has actively been engaged on various educational platforms. But at various places her discourse has been full of xenophobic elements in it. Taking up two instances of the same, the present paper is a response to the kind of depreciation shown by Kire of a section of society, and how it is disappointing, unacceptable and highly detrimental to the various efforts made by the Indians within the state as well as outside, to eradicate the antipathy which has prevailed in the past times. The present paper is also an appeal to the prominent social/literary figures to refrain from provocative discourses which may involuntarily may induce the unwanted and unnecessary racial, communal and ethical tensions in the society.

Index Terms - Easterine Kire, Naga Literature, Culture, Xenophobia, Social Responsibility.

"A big section of the population in many Naga townships is made up migrants. People leave their ancestral villages in search of jobs and better life opportunities and come to settle in the towns. There are also a large number of migrants from the neighbouring states. The migrant population is composed of people who have cut themselves off from their cultural roots. this rootless population fills the urban spaces, and are disappointed in search for wealth and better life prospects." (Easterine Kire, *Walking the Roadless Road*, page 286)

This kind of undervaluing and depreciation of a section of society, without having any empirical proof to justify it, moreover coming from an eminent personality who has numerous feathers to her hat: being the writer of the first Naga novel written in English (2003), winner of the prestigious awards like the Hindu Prize (2015) and Bal Sahitya Puraskar (2018), and also awarded the Governor's Medal for Excellence in Naga Literature (2011), is quite disappointing, unacceptable and highly detrimental to the various efforts made by the Indians within the state as well as outside the state, to eradicate the cultural and racial antipathy that has prevailed in the past times due to ignorance and many other reasons. In the changed scenario of present times where people are no more bound to their birth places and are migrating to other places for their own reasons is a common and normal practice. As such, calling the migrants as '**rootless**' and charging them with the prejudiced notion/opinion of being '**cut off from their culture**' is quite provocative, wrong, and induces the unwanted, unnecessary and unessential racial, communal and ethical tensions.

Ironically, Easterine Kire who hails from Nagaland, was "forced to flee her home due to attacks and harassment by local authorities threatened by her political writings. In 2005, after receiving information about ICORN, Kire became Tromsø's first resident" (ICORN). Another source states that "the violence of the regime in Nagaland, and harassment which she and her husband were subjected to as a result of her writing, led her in to exile in 2005" (pencatala.cat). It is quite surprising that a person who herself has spent such a long time staying away from homeland, now from time to time puts up at Nagaland, would comment so tactlessly without reflecting that it might apply to her own self also?

We are in such times, when, no matter where we stay or live, we celebrate our culture and our unique identity with cultural appreciation towards the different communities in our vicinity, living to the motto of 'unity in diversity'. It's true that there are many non-Naga communities and individuals, staying in Nagaland (especially in towns like Dimapur and Kohima and others districts also), some for years, some are staying here for many generations; but, why not? When the constitution has provided the right to its citizens to go and stay anywhere within the country as long as a restriction is not imposed or law prevents, then why is

one required to justify their decision of moving to a place defending their cultural rootedness otherwise they would be accused or criticized or labeled as being 'rootless'?

As per the statistics, there's no dearth of Nagas moving out from Nagaland to other metropolitan cities of India as well as to other countries. As Easterine Kire admits it in the book "Many young Naga have left their hometowns in search of jobs in other parts of India. ... There are a large number of young people working in the hospitality industry across the country. Call centres are another source of employment... A few Naga youths are to be found in the airlines..." (Kire, page 287). But, just because they are staying away from their birthplace, calling them 'rootless' and labeling them that they have 'cut off from their culture', would be fair? Or is it acceptable? Presuming answer to be 'NO' - not at all! Then why such labeling of Non-Naga people staying in Nagaland?

As stated by Dr. Easterine Kire in the same book, "the number of Nagas who have gone overseas, either to settle or to study, keeps increasing" (Kire, page 287), she further comments:

"In the midst of those swelling numbers, there is a minority of professional Nagas who are excelling at what they do and earning laurels for the state. Earning and living away from home, and longing for home and carrying that longing in their veins is what they are learning to live with." (Kire, page 287).

The description above of Nagas staying away from Nagaland is well appreciated and it automatically incites a sympathetic attitude towards them. Then, why a brutal xenophobic depreciation while describing a set of people who might be from different cultural or racial background; are they less of human beings?

It might be due to the author's opinion or belief that perhaps these outsiders are using up resources and taking up already less available job opportunities the state has to offer as she states that "resources are not sufficient for the increasing population" (Kire, page 286), but, a humble reminder that the Naga Diaspora (whether staying in Delhi or Bengaluru/Bangalore or overseas) also are doing the same. Because there's no place where there are no native populations. In fact, some of the Naga might be at the very place from where the 'rootless' people (as mentioned in the extract) have come to Nagaland as it might be 'their' native place.

Another instance of the above mentioned xenophobic elements in Dr. Kire's discourse, is her 'Keynote Address' on the inauguration event (on 22 November 2021) of a Three Day ICSSR sponsored Online National seminar titled '*Fourth World Literature: Voices of the Marginalised with Special Reference to Northeast India*', from 22nd to 24th November, 2021, organized by the Department of English, Tetso College. Excerpt:

"Here I want to pause and tell you about a student who was in Bangalore. He needed to write something about the Angami festival 'Sekrenyi'. And, somebody told him, recommended a book by a non-Naga, I won't say names but I always call her a cultural thief, because she takes away our stuff, and publishes them and becomes the expert. See that is the thing we have to... take this up. Cultural theft is going on right and left and some something like a body like yours (*referred to Tetso College) can do a lot to stop it, to educate our people. So, this person took away the story of Sekrenyi, wrote about it, put it in her book and this young student was told, that's the best book on Sekrenyi, that's the best book on this Sekrenyi festival. So, I luckily, he wrote to me and I told him, I'll I'll translate it for you. Don't you ever use that book. Use a book by a Naga, and if not I am going to translate, and I did. I spent two days translating, but, I can't, as long as I am alive, I can't allow him to use stuff written by a cultural thief." (video, 21:00-22:20)

There is a concept of 'cultural appreciation' which can be (or perhaps has been) misunderstood (in this context) as 'cultural appropriation'; if so, then hundreds of hundreds persons all over the globe are in danger of being called as 'cultural thieves' in case they use their knowledge and expertise in commenting or describing something on a cultural which is not their own but of some other community, even if they have earned the doctorate in that subject/topic. But, discarding somebody's recommendation or somebody's work who are peers in the educational field is somehow disgraceful towards them; while simply making defamatory remarks and accusing someone of a criminal/ethical crime i.e. of 'cultural theft', does it not smell of xenophobic connotations? The charge might stand for any woman writer who is of not Naga origin and has written on Sekrenyi; since the name has not been disclosed. Is it ethical or fair to do this?

On one hand, there has been a major complaint on Naga writers' part that Naga writings have faced 'publishing politics that dictated what the Naga writers should write about' (Kire 2019, 274), but, on ethical and moral grounds there shouldn't be no objection if such portions which are 'objectionable', should be removed from the book or shouldn't have been published at the first place. Freedom of expression in speech or writing doesn't mean that a writer/public figure is free to offend a community with their subjective views without any empirical basis.

In the same discourse she, while urging the audience to be 'Naga-centric' (video, 16:06) clarifies that "...when I say Naga centric, don't feel that communities that are not Naga are excluded; no, it's anyone born in Nagaland. I had this wonderful student when I was teaching at university in Nagaland and he was originally from Bihar but grown, born and brought up here. So, he said when he went away to study in Delhi, he came back saying 'Ma'am, they're not like us.' And you know what that means 'they're not like us', he couldn't fit in, because he was a Naga in his heart. So, let's make it very inclusive. It's anyone who thinks of Nagaland as home." (video, 16:05-16:51)

So, are all these people 'the communities that are not Naga' or/and 'who think of Nagaland as home', the same ones who are described as people who 'have cut themselves off from their roots' and are 'rootless'?

And also, it is natural for a person to feel more inclined towards and being a part of the environment and people he/she is born and brought up with. It is natural for a boy (originally from Bihar) to feel and believe that he also is a Naga (by heart), even if not indigenous but by the virtue of being born and brought up in Nagaland and among Naga people who he naturally feels like being a part of. It is natural for most of the human beings. But taking his review of other part of India (Delhi), his comment that "they're not like us" and giving an impression of both (Delhi and Nagaland and people in both respective places) as binary opposite to each other is certainly not appreciable but looks like a judgmental act of dividing and forcing in friction. Because there is a good number of Nagas who have been privileged to have seen India beyond Northeast and after spending as much time as it's sufficient to make one a part of their environment, when they're back they find themselves to be 'different' than their fellow Naga brethren and find it difficult to adjust as they feel the 'gap' relating to thinking and ideologies that 'the exposure to a larger world' has created between them wherein their fellow beings' experience and exposure is confined to only a limited extent. So, they feel themselves fitting more with people out from Nagaland and prefer being with them for more intellectual stimulation rather than people from their own community. So, instead of putting one's affiliation against inclination, trying to demean the whole lot,

shouldn't be done and we should be careful about what impression we are trying to make about the object of our context of discourse, on a public platform.

Why one is compelled to write this write up is, because respected Dr. Easterine Kire herself said - "When others define you, they devalue you (video, 15:54-15:59) .. Don't allow others to devalue you; don't allow others to define you" (video, 16:53-16:56), so, why should a non-Naga let somebody devalue them by being tagged as 'rootless' even if it comes from an eminent Naga personality who has the power and platform to create an influence on the society?

It's a humble appeal that the platform (be it oral or written) shouldn't be misused or abused by inflicting tensions which are detrimental to otherwise hopeful endeavor of bloomed nationalism, unity and inclusiveness.

Besides, in modern Nagaland there's so much acceptance, peaceful coexistence and celebration of cultural diversity that not only Dimapur becomes lit and in full wing festivity mode during Diwali, Durga Puja, Holi, and other festivals, in fact it's common to see people from Naga community visiting the pandals and enjoying and celebrating with their non-Naga brethren; doesn't the whole Nagaland get to know when there's Chhat Puja even if it may not be a Naga festival or occasion, without looking at the calendar, but by the fervor of its celebration by its respective community? There are their respective cultural monuments in their colonies of non Naga communities where they stay, they wear their own cultural attire, they celebrate and follow their traditional ways in marriage ceremonies and other occasions, and, their cultural affinities are not questionable.

Despite all this, what sense is there behind proclaiming that these people are 'cut off from their culture'? No, there's not any; only ignorance and insensitive xenophobic depreciation. Otherwise these non-Naga migrants are as much rooted in their culture as Nagas living outside Nagaland. Tokhu Emong is celebrated in Delhi by Lotha community staying in Delhi, they get together and celebrate it with equal zeal as they would back in Nagaland. Same is done by other Naga communities about their cultural programs, not only in Delhi but wherever they are. So, nobody is 'rootless' be it Naga or non-Naga migrants.

Words cannot express the joy of seeing the young generation proudly asserting their identity as an 'Indian' first, over their regional or cultural/ethnic identity; not only on international/national platforms but also in day-to-day simple conversations.

Young generation taking up rough and tough difficult journeys to the highest peak of mountain (Mt. Saramati) and other difficult regions in the state to make sure that the Tricolor is hoisted and unfurled there on the National occasions like Independence Day or Republic Day is one of the many examples of declaring their pride in being Indian. The pride on their face while singing the national anthem, with the hoisted Tricolor, their enthusiasm of making a contribution to their beloved nation in whatever way they can make is evident of the positive change in the scenario. Recently, in the month of April, a joint mountaineering expedition to Mt. Khelia (the second highest peak in Nagaland situated in the Indo-Myanmar Border) was made by the 14th Assam Rifles team along with Mountaineering Club Tetso College team and NCC girl students of Government Higher Secondary School Noklak, to promote tourism in the Eastern Nagaland and to spread the message of unity and patriotism under the aegis of 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav' campaign.

All these are precious things and an evidence that younger generations are refusing to stay bound within past political-conflicts, has wonderfully overcome those cultural-identity-related issues, lives in present striving for excellence and looks forward to having a better and promising future. This does not make them less of Naga.

Let us all be more careful not to demean others; we all are constantly trying to eradicate 'discriminations' of every kind, why to perpetuate it? It has taken a great deal of time to reach at present state where people have become aware (and still in the process) and considerate of one another's differences. And, people (especially the influence makers) must take care of not causing any detrimental impression on budding minds, act with more sensibility and sensitive understanding, display better EQ and take accountability for the impact their words can cause. Let us utilize the platforms available to us in a positive and constructive way.

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