

Conceptual and Methodological Problems in a Study of Tribal Movements

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The article examines the conceptual ambiguities and problems of categorisation associated with tribal studies. It discusses the methodological concerns in tribal studies both from etic and emic perspectives. The dilemmas surrounding the various concepts used to categorise the tribes or indigenous peoples are another features of the article. The scarce or complete absence of empirical evidence in some of the tribal communities has rendered an emic perspective to a position open to the question of subjectivity. It is observed that in their attempt to salvage their place in human history or history of their right to self-determination, certain events were examined from conflicting perspectives with an attempt to reorient the history in favour of their own tribes. Certain concepts that do not conform to the events described are employed in categorising the movements. The conceptual and methodological problems in tribal studies are then followed by studies of movements and their significance in tribal studies. Reiterating the conceptual difference and the political implications of the difference between the concepts 'tribe' and 'indigenous', the article examines the intricacies related to various movements in tribal areas and the methodological problem in placing them in either of tribal movement or indigenous movement.

Keywords: tribe, indigenous, Scheduled Tribe, movement, oral history

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Introduction

Writings in scripts and symbols to transmit messages have always been beneficial to mankind. The art of writing gradually transformed into means of power and authority. Authenticity and legitimacy of history and claims are often supported by written records apart from other empirical evidences. In such a literate world where oral narratives stand inferior to written records, the legitimacy of history and claims of the tribes who are deprived of written evidences are relegated to a position of myths. Cultures and languages were studied by anthropologists and sociologists to understand and trace tribal identities, and consequently helped the colonisers to administer and thus rule them more effectively. Sometime, belief practices of the tribes are juxtaposed with other dominant religious groups and they are reduced to a standard of sub-religious groups and animism characterised by baseless sacrifices. Often there is no conclusive study on tribes. Tribal Studies are often characterised by speculations. The changing political and economic scenarios contribute to conflicting findings in tribal studies. Various tribal movements are interpreted into different versions. One of the methodological

loopholes in tribal studies is the adoption of an integrationist approach. Tribal movements are sometime viewed as part of the larger Bharat or Indian freedom movement and nation building process. The problem begins right from the concept employed to study them. The concepts 'tribe' and 'indigenous' are often used interchangeably by scholars and activists. The political implications in the use of these two concepts, sometime synonymously must be acknowledged. Earlier there was no political problem in defining the concept 'indigenous' as they were identified as 'the original inhabitant of the land at the time of its conquest or settlement by Europeans' (ILO 1953: 3). This definition of ILO does not conform to the understanding of the term indigenous in the Indian context. In India, the Santals that constitute one of the three largest adivasis or tribes are settled towards the end of the 18th century with the intervention of the colonial rulers (Roy Burman 1994a: 1). Thus, we see here a group of people were settled after colonisation took place and not before the arrival of the colonisers. Such similar instance is cited by a well known historian from Manipur, N. Joykumar Singh. He claimed that

Kukis are not indigenous people of Manipur (2005: 46). It was after the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) that the Kukis were settled in Manipur by the British colonisers after consulting Nar Singh, the King of Manipur, in early 1840s (ibid.: 46). Similarly, two Naga writers claimed that in 1851-1852 about 8000 Kukis invaded the Zeliangrong lands and the British collaborated with the Kukis and supplied with firearms and ammunitions to ward off the Nagas and Lushais who often raided in the valley (Pamei 2001: 42; Yonuo 1982: 11). All these claims are refuted by Kukis. Seilen Haokip terms such historical account of the Kukis as 'a popular and most erroneous view' (2011: 218). According to Seilen Haokip, the 'Pooyas, the traditional records of the Meitei people, date Kuki in 33 A.D., and according to Cheitharol Kumaba (*Royal Chronicles of the Meitei kings*), in the year 186 Sakabda (AD 264) Meidungu Taothingmang, a Kuki, became king' (ibid.: 218-219). However, despite these historical accounts from non-Kukis, the Kukis are considered as one of the indigenous peoples in Manipur. It seems these contentious historical debates can be resolved only from the accounts of the ghosts of the pasts.

It is more confusing to read the work of some scholars who worked on tribal movements. This is so because the nature of the movements being studied, when examined completely, are far beyond the scope of conceptual conformity to the term tribe. They are more of indigenous movement than tribal movement. This is to be understood keeping in mind the understanding of the concept tribe in Indian context. In the Indian context, tribes are invariably the group of people who needs to be integrated within the mainstream Indian civilisation and not with a distinct political identity. At global context, the concept indigenous is strongly associated with the idea of oppressed or subjugated people who needs to be liberated from the colonial yoke. According to Virginius Xaxa (1999: 3590), the term indigenous was used without being critically questioned or debated. However, the scenario changed when the concept indigenous began to be internationalised for addressing the issues of the rights of the so called indigenous people. Virginius Xaxa further stated that in the contemporary period the term indigenous began to be used to identify those people who suffer 'domination and subjugation' (ibid.: 3590). If the differences in the concepts tribe and indigenous are to be acknowledged in studies of movements, one also has to be more cautious in the categorisation of the tribal and indigenous movements.

Another methodological complication in tribal studies is found in heavy dependence on Censuses. Censuses are not ethnographic studies that unravel the implicit meanings of the life of the people. They are enumeration

activities based on survey and questionnaire. In such activities, categorisation of belief systems of the tribes based on the prepared categories of religions has done much injustice. Tribal belief systems are not acknowledged and recognised as distinct. They are relegated to a position of sub-groups of Hinduism. This has facilitated in weakening the tribal identity and culture. According to B.K. Roy Burman (1977, cited in Roy Burman 1994: 66), there are three modus operandi that are employed to transform the tribal peoples- Hindu method of tribal absorption of N.K. Bose (1941), Sanskritisation of M.N. Srivivas (1952) and Santhalisation of M.K.Gautam (1978). Such attempt to assimilate the tribal belief system within the Hindu fold renders the idea of unity in diversity as practically meaningless. According to Kaka D. Iralu, '[t]here is not a single Naga Hindu or Muslim to date' (2009: 10) among the Nagas. According to 1991¹ Census, the religious categories used to enumerate the religious groups in Manipur were Jews/ Judaism, Kabui, Non-Christian, Pangan, Tribal Religion and Unclassified. Kabui is not a religion. Kabui is a collective name of two tribes in Manipur- Rongmei and Inpui. Their traditional belief systems are popularly known as Tingkao Ragwang Chapriak (TRC), Heraka and Champa which is less known. The difference between Non-Christian and Tribal Religion is not clearly specified. In Manipur, the Kabui/Rongmei Christians call all those who are not Christians as Non-Christians and specifically use the term *jou jangmei chap* (belief system of wine drinkers) to tribal belief systems. Non-Christians include Hindus, Muslims, followers of tribal traditional belief systems, etc. The term Pangan is a local name for Muslim in Manipur. It is not used as a religion, but as a group of people. Islam is their religion. The failure to differentiate between Christians and Christianity will do more harm to the relation between the followers of traditional belief systems and Christians. A lackadaisical attitude towards such concepts should be avoided in research. Despite these negative sides of Censuses, they are still one of the popularly depended data sources in tribal studies that have serious implications on their lives. The policies and programmes formulated by the representative governments are based on the Censuses. The oral narratives of the tribal people that also reflect their aspirations and needs are often viewed as unauthentic and not scientific enough to be used at the policy level. In this myriad of limitations faced in studies of tribes and challenged by questions of authenticity, the position of a researcher is challenging.

¹ Directorate of Census Operations, Manipur. 1991. Census of India. Series-15 Part IV- B (II), pp.37-38.

Studies of various New Social Movements in tribal context will provide a new vista for tribal contemporary studies. Most of the tribal studies are related to land rights, socio-economic exploitation, religious reformations, identity, etc. In the North-East region of India, conflict with the colonial rule, role of missionaries, local Christians, and conflict with Indian state are typical of tribal studies. Several of the early studies drew data from colonial writings and educated Christians. The colonial legacies are viewed as more authentic than the local oral narratives. The colonial legacies are result of oppression and subjugation of the tribal people. Deploying such legacies in tribal studies as authentic resources without due respect for the oral narratives of the researched will do more harm. This propensity to project the knowledge of the dominant is what B.K. Roy Burman called 'intellectual imperialism' (1994b: 24). This form of imperialism is the new form of domination the present generation witnesses mostly in academic works and consequently in politics.

In the North-East region of India, several tribal studies were done. The North-East has always been viewed as problematic region. The region has been of immense significance to India from strategic point of view. S.R. Toppo attributed gross administrative failure and 'wrong decisions' by the policy-makers to 'ignorance and outdated knowledge about the tribal people' (2000: 1).

Conceptual and categorisation of problems in Tribal studies

Conceptual precision is to be emphasised all through the process of research on issues pertaining to tribes. Researcher is sometime faced with the issue of theoretical definition of concepts and field based comprehension of the concepts. In studies of tribal movements, a theoretically sensitive researcher will be cautious not to allow confusion between various concepts such as sovereignty, freedom, self-determination, autonomy, homeland, etc. However, a researcher will find extremely difficult to differentiate between these concepts in the field. Such varied concepts that may be of critical importance in tribal movements are often found to be absent in tribal vocabulary. They all seem to have common meanings to the people in the field. Some of the above mentioned concepts do not even exist in their vocabulary. Common people in the field often do not make such distinctions. However, as a researcher, he/ she cannot categorise all the tribal movements under single category or theoretically sound category. The concept, self-determination is further divided into external right of self-determination and internal right of self-determination. Such clinical distinction of a concept is not common in the vocabularies of tribes. Some of their ways of life are not articulated in terms of complicated terms.

What is practical for them is treasured by the tribal people in their daily lived experiences, though not in intellectual discourses or writings.

Some of the interviewees the author interacted during fieldwork in Manipur and Nagaland in the summer of 2012 for a study on Zeliangrong movement were not in a position to use some of the concepts mentioned above. They merely expressed their desire to be free from any foreign domination or subjugation. Here, according to the interviewees, the term foreign means any group that do not belong to the Nagas or the Zeliangrong community. They do not critically discuss homeland and sovereignty or freedom and autonomy. They just do not want to live under the rule of any foreign rule. However, such lack of conceptual distinction and clarity render their claims for freedom in a contemporary world into sedition or secession. For those tribal people who did not experience any element of democracy of free India apart from military oppression and election, it would sometime amount to unethical practice to expect a conceptual clarity in an articulation of their aspirations from their movements. However, this does not mean that the researcher is left with no option but to study the movement from the pre-conceived framework. The Commission for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes submitted a report in 1952. Some of the features for defining a tribe were- living away from civilised world, practice of animism with worship of ghosts and spirits (Toppo 2000: 16-17). Such features used to identify tribe have a propensity to stigmatise the identified tribes. If the word indigenous is used, there will be political implications, so they are probably thought to be best avoided. Who is civilised and what are the criteria to determine civilised people? Belief systems of tribal peoples are often relegated to animism. Animism primarily means ascribing spirits to inanimate objects. However, tribal people do not worship trees or rocks. They worship God ('God' is a preferred term here and not spirit). They have religious philosophy which is not articulated in sophisticated theological terms. Avoiding any strong conclusive finding or categorisation of the tribal movements may be suggested. Problematisation of concepts and issues, rather than conclusion in tribal studies may be the palliative measure to undo the effect of 'intellectual imperialism' (Roy Burman 1994(b): 24) exercised against the tribes. Problematisation of the concepts relevant in tribal studies must be carried out in official documents, scholarly work and even in the field. The contextual relevance in terms of time and space also need to be well accounted. The tendency to categorise similar movements under same category must be avoided.

As categories of people are defined by their race, languages, cultures and their ways of life, the problem in

defining the concept of tribe is immense. Certain groups that were termed as tribes by the colonial writings are also not considered as tribe and thus Scheduled Tribe status is not accorded to such group. In Manipur, 'Koomul, Looang, Moirang and Meithei', according to McCulloch (1859: 4), were all categorised as 'principal' tribe of the valley. However, the Meiteis in Manipur are not considered as tribe by the Nagas and the Kukis. Be it Koomul, Looang, Moirang or Meithei, they were all categorised as Meitei. The position of the Meitei as tribe was not commonly accepted by all the Meitei groups. However, *Seven Sisters Post*, Guwahati based News agency, reported on 9th December 2012, a Schedule Tribe Demand Committee submitting a memorandum to the Governor of Manipur for grant of Scheduled Tribe Status ('Meiteis cry for tribal tag')². It reported the claim of Meitei group "that the valley inhabitant Meeteis or the Meiteis have their roots in the hill tribes and that in fact they are a tribe and as such should be categorised as a schedule tribe on par with other tribes of Manipur". This throws open a new vista for engaging in contemporary tribal studies with special emphasis on Constitution.

Sometime tribe is used as a social group and an administrative group. There are differences in these two groups. Those groups that resemble a tribal group based on their social structures and cultural and geographical boundaries may not be still categorised as scheduled tribe in the administrative domain. Thus, administrative categorisation and social categorisation are not always same. We still have certain tribes that are still not granted Scheduled Tribe status. Sociologists and anthropologists define the concept tribe, but the administration is in want of definition of the concept tribe. The administration depends entirely on the Constitutional approach to tribe. Here, Article 342 (1) of the Indian Constitution is the sole source of generating a category called Scheduled Tribe. In India, the concept tribe has a very strong administrative application and 'it is based on a political criterion' (Dube 1977: 3). It is not a social group, but a political group. India also has a case where 'communities which are not conventionally regarded as tribal also find mention in the schedule' list. Some of them are Muslims of Lakshadweep (ibid.: 3-4). The drawback of the Article 342 (1) is in the absence of conceptual definition of tribe despite the provision for declaring a tribe as Scheduled Tribe. Thus, in the Constitution of India there is no defined social group such as tribe. It however, accommodates an administrative category, Scheduled

² Yumnam Rupachnadra. 2012 'Meiteis cry for tribal tag'. *Seven Sisters Post*. <http://sevensisterspost.com/meiteis-cry-for-tribal-tag/>. Posted on 9/12/2012. Retrieved on 11/12/2012 at 2:21pm.

Tribe. This poses as a serious loophole in studies of tribes.

A brief discussion on the understanding of indigenous peoples in India is drawn from the work of International Labour Office (1953: 13) which was titled *Indigenous Peoples: Living and Working conditions of Aboriginal Populations in Independent Countries*. In India the indigenous people are known by the term adivasi which again is not popular in North-East India. The term adivasi is a composite term comprising 'adi' meaning original and 'vasi' meaning inhabitant. They are also known as "scheduled tribes" under the Constitutional provision of Article 342. They are to be specified by the President of the Union of India by public notification. They are believed to be the oldest group of population settled in the country. Various criteria were laid down by different States of India to differentiate the aboriginal or indigenous peoples from the rest of the population. A table is presented below showing the states and the groups of people categorized as indigenous peoples.

States	Criteria for indigenous status
Assam	Mongoloid stock, Tibeto-Burman linguistic group, existence of clan type
Bombay Government	Residence in forest areas
Madhya Pradesh Government	Tribal origin, tribal language and residence in forest areas
Madras	A primitive tribal way of life and residence in less easily accessible hills and in remote or interior forests, with little or no contact with other population groups
Orissa	Pre-Dravidian or Mongoloid racial origin
Punjab	Tribal language
West Bengal	Tribal origin
Hyderabad	Residence in jungles, animistic religion, the use of local dialect, forcible marriage, hunting, fishing and gathering of forest foods as the main means of subsistence, etc.
Mysore Government	Habitation in remote hilly tracts in the jungle

From the above table we find that the elements of colonialism marked by oppression or subjugation do not appear at all. Negative attribute such as 'forcible marriage' is ascribed to identify the indigenous peoples in India. The criteria also push the indigenous people to 'remote or interior forests', 'remote hilly tracts in the jungle' and 'less easily accessible hills and in remote or interior forests, with little or no contact with other population groups' who are supposedly civilised. The adjective 'Tribal' is often used to identify the indigenous

despite the concept 'tribe' still not being conclusive and not defined in the Constitution.

The problem in the use of the term adivasi to mean the original inhabitants is pointed out by B.K. Roy Burman. He claimed that the Mundas are also identified as adivasi despite not being the original inhabitants of Chotanagpur. The iron smelting group, Asurs was already settled much before the arrival of the Mundas (Roy Burman 1994a: 1). Based on Winick's dictionary of anthropology, the term tribe is defined as a "social group usually with a definite area, dialect, cultural homogeneity and unifying social organization" (Roy Burman 1994b: 22). Considering the geographical locations of Naga group spread across different states and nations, the variations in the dialects like those of the Tangkhul in Manipur, and the stark differences in certain cultural elements even within certain sub-groups of a tribe, the Winick's definition of a tribe might seem irrelevant. The Tangkhul tribe that claims to be a single tribe has different dialects for almost all the different villages spread across the state of Manipur. Despite these variations in their dialects and different locations they still claim and identify themselves as belonging to a single tribe. The Nagas, a conglomeration of various tribes which have more sub-groups within them, are found in two different nations-India and Myanmar. The sub-groups of Nagas claim that they had common origin, and oral histories of the various Naga tribes claim common ancestors. However, the various Naga groups have different languages and different cultures. Their belief systems are different. Some Naga groups have evolved tremendously towards Hinduism. This is observed among the Zeliangrong group of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. This may be understood in the recent work of Soihiamlung Dangmei, *Cultural Positioning of Tribes in North-east India: Mapping the Evolving Heraka Identity*. According to Soihiamlung Dangmei (2013: 28)

Attempts are also made to link the vanvasi (forest dwellers) with the rest of Hindu civilisation. Instead of progressing with a sophisticated notion of adivasi (tribal) culture and its place in Indian society, the notion of vanvasi reverts to an ideological pristine state that can somehow be preserved. The Heraka's followers are seen as preserving the Sanatan Dharma, which is treated synonymously with traditional Hinduism. For the RSS, the Heraka movement presents a practice that is consonant with the Hindu ethos.

Eurocentric view of state is another drawback pointed out by B.K. Roy Burman. Here, state is viewed as 'polity with fixed boundaries and territorial administration, with recognised sovereignty and centralized authority, and with a monopoly of coercive force'. Those societies that

do not conform to this definition were relegated to a state of "stateless", "acephalous" or "tribal" (1994b: 24). The Eurocentric notion of state ruled out kinship, caste or ethnicity found in Asia and Africa as comprising the elements of state. This trend to dominate the concept of state from Eurocentric view is termed by Roy Burman as 'intellectual imperialism' (1994(b): 24). Andre Beteille ruled out distinction between tribe and state when he stated "one cannot proceed very far by viewing tribe and state as two distinct and successive stages of evolution" (1968: 310, cited in Roy Burman 1994b: 24). Nihar Ranjan Ray claimed that anthropologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used the terms caste and tribe synonymously and later began to use them as they are 'cognate social groups'. The use of the term tribe underwent a change with the growth of European nationalism and consequently tribe was begun to be used to identify a 'stage of socio-political evolution of a community of people within a given territory and language area' (1972: 3-24, cited in Roy Burman 1994b: 25-26). Such conceptualization of tribe creates social chasm which engenders a misconception of the people viewed as tribe. A hierarchy of civilization is also created in which the tribal civilisation is required to proceed towards the other non-tribal groups.

Nihar Ranjan Ray (1972) discussed the historical context of the evolution of the concept tribe. The term tribe is rooted in Latin, the Middle English term 'tribuz' which means 'the three divisions into which the early Romans were grouped'. Later it gradually evolved into Modern English word 'tribe'. For the Romans, tribe was a political division, but it is used by the Greeks to mean their 'fraternities' of different geographical areas. The Irish used it to mean 'families or communities of persons having the same surname'. However, the anthropologists and sociologists of the West widely used the meaning given in Oxford Dictionary which says that a tribe is "a race of people; now applied especially to a primary aggregate of people in a primitive or barbarous condition, under a headman or chief" (Ray 1972: 3-24, cited in Roy Burman 1994b: 25-26). In the Indian context, the political connotation of the concept tribe as originated in the days of the Romans is found in the Constitutional category of Scheduled Tribes. Scheduled Tribes are political category arranged under the provision of the Constitution with no sociological or anthropological explanation in the Constitution. Scheduled Tribe is a political unit of certain section of the population. The Irish conceptualisation of the term tribe is close to the tribes of India. The presence of various narratives of their common origin, cultures, languages, etc. bring them under a collective identity. Various tribal movements were preceded by efforts to forge a collective identity despite historical feuds and certain stark cultural and linguistic differences.

Movements provide a common platform for new identity and narratives. Movements also engender wave of thoughts that challenge the colonial or dominant knowledge about the tribal people. Emic perspectives find their overarching trajectory and some of them have succeeded in uprooting colonial knowledge imposed on them.

Injustices faced by the tribal people may also be attributed to the typical concepts employed in studies of tribes. Concepts such as rebellion, revolt or revolution, protest, 'Backward Hindus' (Gurye 1963), primitive, savage uncivilised, barbarian, animism, 'backward communities' (Paul 1989: 40) are popular in tribal studies. S.K. Chatterjee observed that the Sanskrit term Kirata is accepted by scholars as indicating 'the wild non-Aryan tribes' settled in Himalayan mountains and North-Eastern parts of the country (1951: 16-17, cited in Roy Burman 1994b: 28). S.K. Chatterjee further claimed that the non-Aryans who are sometime regarded by some authors as degraded Ksatriya are not relegated to an utter barbarian position. He considers the Kiratas to be superior to wild or primitive tribes of Austric origin (1951: 16-17, cited in Roy Burman 1994b: 28). S.R. Toppo is of the view that most of the tribal belief systems are animism (2000: 2). He further stated that the tribal in the North-East region are 'more backward', and raised the issue of racial affinity to Chinese people and the consequent strategic problem of 'Chinese infiltration' (ibid.: 2). However true a claim of an author may be, relating the movement in tribal region with foreign nation always produces a propensity to view the whole population of the region as traitors or not loyal to the nation. Such work may be found in the work of author like S.C. Dev (1988: 22). For S.R. Toppo, neighbours of the 'aboriginal' or 'tribal' people in India are 'more civilized' (2000: 15). Use of these concepts reinforces social stigma against the tribes. Severity of stigma is aggravated when the race of the people is different as in the case of the Mongolian race of the North-East region. The tribes of Central India do not seem to face racial abuses from the non-tribal race of other parts of India. However, the tribal people of North-East are awaited by racial abuses after crossing the Assam boundary. The narrow corridor of an approximate width of 33 km that separates the region from the rest of the nation may rightly be called the North-East Laxman Rekha. The North-East Laxman Rekha is the boundary beyond which the Mongoloid stock of the region experience racial abuses in some other parts of India. For the people from other parts of the nation who have not had even a glimpse of the North-Eastern region of India, the work of anthropologists and sociologists with high reputation in academic are often the source of their knowledge. If G.S. Ghurye calls all the tribes as 'Backward Hindus', the young minds of the Universities

who hardly have seen rural part of the nation are very likely to accept this claim without much critical question posed against it. E.J. Hobsbawm considers the primitive movements as 'archaic type' (1965: 1- 90, cited in Paul 1989: 40). Positive virtues are scarcely associated with tribes in most of the tribal studies. Hinduism and Christianity are often taken as reference groups for tribal cultural studies. In tribal studies the term primitive is often used. Maurice Godelier presented two characteristics of primitive- negative and positive. Negative features of primitive are lack or lesser degree of literacy, civilisation, development, industrialisation, etc. as compared to Western societies. The positive side of primitive is the presence of social relations based on kinship, pervasive religion, cooperation for common goals and others (1977: 30, cited in Roy Burman 1994b: 36). Some scholars resort to use of terms such as 'non-literate' or 'pre-literate' to avoid being judgemental. But, what form of literacy or what degree of literacy is to be taken as benchmark to determine whether a society is literate or pre-literate? There are head-hunting Pawnee Indians who had knowledge of writing in the seventeenth century (Roy Burman 1994b: 47). Some Naga groups had writing skills. However, due to absence of advanced technology for preserving their writings, their histories are now pigeonholed as that of pre-literate society. In a revolutionary step a Rongmei, Late Laokeinang Phaomei, from Tamenglong district of Manipur developed a Naga script. The software of the script was released in January 2011.

Another conceptual clarity demanded in tribal studies is the distinction between ethnic group and tribal group. According to B.K. Roy Burman, despite ethnic groups sharing features with tribal social organisation are all not tribes. He described ethnic group as 'Any hereditary group with shared values, style of life, exclusive symbol of identity and consciousness of kind' (1994b: 67). The tribes have historical association and individual right over productive resources which may not be so in the case of ethnic group. There is closer ties among the individuals in tribal societies and manifest a relatively closed societies. However, all the ethnic groups may not have closed societies (ibid.: 67). According to Vernon Hewitt, ethnicity does not hinge on 'primordial loyalty', but it is politically constructed and undergoes a process of changes when there is 'socio-economic change and structural transformation' (1989, cited in Roy Burman 1994b: 1-2). Distinctiveness of identity also depends on 'criteria consciously chosen' (Hubex 1988: 28, cited in Roy Burman 1994b: 2) and 'ideology' (Berger 1977: 155, cited in Roy Burman 1994b: 2) by the group of people. The flexibility of ethnic boundaries of various communities has contributed to 'the processes of fission and fusion' and this demands judgement of researcher

who studies tribes (Roy Burman 1994b: 2). Facing a stronger alien force sometime necessitated forging new coalition. Some relations resulting from the need to challenge a stronger outside force go beyond a coalition force and develop into closer ties.

Methodological concerns in tribal studies

Researchers studying tribes, due to scarcity of empirical evidences or written records, tend to depend heavily on in-depth unstructured interview and adopt observations as methods to gather ample volume of meaningful data and search for patterns in the themes. As most of the tribal knowledge is not recorded, there is also a tendency to emerge variations even within the same social context. The social, religious and political affiliation of the carrier of the knowledge sometime play role in emergence of tainted or biased knowledge. The element of subjectivity tends to be high in such situation. The researchers are thus, deeply concerned about reducing the degree of bias of the researched to minimum (Patel 1994: 21). The fear of subjectivity may influence the choice of methods used in the study.

Statistical measurements are largely associated with quantities, and the qualitative aspects are taken care of by using appropriate tools and techniques (Patel 1994: 21) that can draw even implicit meanings. Use of methods depends on the objectives of the study, and an anthropologist may prescribe either participant or non-participant observation as methods for data collection (Patel 1994: 21). Researchers may also find criticism being hurled at the methods used by other social scientists adopting altogether different methods. However, such criticism must not affect the applicability of the findings of the research. The researcher must ensure that the methods employed serve the objectives of the research (Patel 1994: 21).

Knowledge of the people who do not have written records is relegated to an unauthentic status in the words of Jacques Derrida- "*Il n'y a pas d'hors texte*" (There is nothing outside of the text) (Currie 1997: 6). Although it does not mean 'that the world is simply a linguistic object' (Currie 1997: 6), the deficiency of any empirical evidence in some tribal groups renders their oral history to a low status. The project of deconstruction sometime is almost impossible when there are several conflicting narratives for one theme under study. Often the tribal oral history is brushed aside as myths. Ranajit Guha (1982, cited in Currie 1997: 8) pointed out the limitations of the elite historiography in elucidating the Indian freedom struggle. The role of the elite groups which was dominated by the Congress classes was interpreted as a 'demand for independence' while the activities of the

subaltern are interpreted as responses to 'their miserable conditions of existence' (Guha 1982, cited in Currie 1997: 8). This trend of knowledge being the product and under the control of the powerful group is still not obsolete.

Madan C. Paul pointed out the methodological implication of studying collective activities at different period of time and space or as past tense. What may be social movement at one time may not seem to appear as movement when studied at different time and space (1989: 14). Another serious loophole in a study of movement and which has an implication on tribal studies is the superficial analysis of the movement. A holistic approach is essential in drawing a comprehensive knowledge about the movement. A partial observation or study of only some aspects of a movement will not deliver a comprehensive knowledge about the movement. According to Madan C. Paul, riots, revolts, uprising, etc. are responses of the tribal people against exploitation by the colonial power. He further avers that "Surface observation of this phenomena may lead us to categorise them as scattered 'events', or 'episode' and not as 'movements'" (1989: 14). However, these events of resistance by the tribal people were centred around the issues affecting their existence itself (ibid.: 14) and thus trivialise the tribal movement and confine it to parochial tribalism. Such similar impact of 'superficial knowledge' misleading the 'outsider' is reiterated by T.S. Gangte (2003: 11).

Generalisation, which is typical of a positivist approach, of the findings from the economically and politically advanced sections of the society when applied to autochthonous societies, will bring in a serious setback (Furer-Haimendorf 1982: 1) to the same societies. The diversity or heterogeneity of societies must be taken into account in a tribal study. Considering the nature of data to be elicited from the societies that are often in want of written records and also the nature of data often presented in the form of myths, narratives or accounts laden with meanings, methodologically tribal studies are somehow distanced from positivist approach or statistical analyses. Most of the accounts of the origin of the tribes are in the form of unverifiable myths (see for example Yonuo 1982: 4; Gangte 2003: 14-17; Kamei 2004: 19, 24-30; Kamei 2006: 71; Kamei 2012: 28-29). However, this does not rule out the importance of statistical analysis wherever they are required in tribal studies.

Most of the communities in the North-East region and in other tribal regions do not have scripts. This fact has deprived them of written document about their own people that may now be used as data. Such limitation on tribal studies accounted by absence of written records was

acknowledged by Fr. John Lakra. He further stressed on the need to rewrite the writings on tribal people and correct the wrongs done by earlier 'foreigners' who wrote extensively on tribal people and also the work of 'Indian authors, who were equally foreigners to the tribal community' (2007: 1-2). Consequently, most studies on North-East tribes are based on the writings and censuses of the colonial period. One measure that may be considered to address this methodological issue could be adoption of ethno-history as suggested by Cohn (Toppo 2000: 48). Ethno-history is carried out from an emic perspective. It is used to study the non-European peoples by analysing the data found in the form of 'documentary, oral and archaeological sources and the conceptual framework and insight of cultural and social anthropology' (ibid.: 48). According to Cohn, ethno-historian has 'first hand experience and knowledge' of the people being studied (ibid.: 48). S.R. Toppo, however cautioned against confining to micro-context while engaging with ethno-history (ibid.: 48). This is one significant area in ethno-history that needs to be constantly evaluated. Choice of concepts, methods and tools also reflect ontological or one's position on the issue being studied.

Tribal movements and tribal studies

Attempting to understand tribes from the tribal movements is a mammoth task. This is so because the concept of social movements itself is fraught with conflicting or contextual definitions. Some definitions are based on the nature of the goal while some are based on the means employed in the movement. Movement like peasant movements are categorised based on the characteristic of the participants. Indian freedom movement is so called because of the goal of the movement. However, the various means employed in Indian freedom movement are not used to name the movement. Some other movements are not as lucky as the Indian freedom movement. Despite the British calling the event of 1857 as 'Sepoy Mutiny' (Geaves 1996: 27), the Indian scholars prefer to call it the First War of Independence. In the words of Jawaharlal Nehru 'Almost all the earlier books and accounts of the events of 1857 were written by Englishmen. Therefore they are naturally biased: while the role of the Englishmen is praised, the Indians are dubbed as traitors and mutineers.'³ Sometime, the means used in the movement dominate in the movement studies and the natures of the means are used as names of the movements. This approach serves as boon for integration of the tribal people within the fold of

the Indian nation or larger religious group by disallowing the projection of true characteristic of the movement. The inherent differences that were present between some tribal movements and the larger Indian movement during the colonial period are totally ignored in such tribal studies and legitimise the nation building project based on political integration and cultural assimilation.

The position of S.R. Toppo on tribal political movements may be termed as parochial outlook. According to him all the tribal political movements in the tribal region in North-East India were carried out under the leadership of Christians (2000: 4). This seems to be an attempt to ward off the activities of the Christian missionaries in the region. This brings to mind the need to reiterate the debates around the concepts tribe and indigenous. Haipou Jadonang Malangmei who was hanged by the British on 29 August, 1931 for proclaiming the downfall of British Empire was not a Christian. If the concept 'tribe' is used from an integrationist approach, and consider the tribe as 'Backward Hindus' (Ghurye 1963) then the political movement under Jadonang was not a tribal movement. If the concept indigenous is used to imply those colonised and subjugated people, then the political movement under Jadonang is apt to be termed as indigenous movement and not as tribal movement. If the movement under Jadonang is described as indigenous movement then the statement of S.R. Toppo will have no negative implication on Zeliangrong movement. But if the Zeliangrong movement under Jadonang is studied as one of the tribal political movements in K.S. Singh's (ed. 1982) *Tribal Movements in India*, and considering the fact that Jadonang was not a Christian, S.R. Toppo's statement needs correction.

Social movement, according to Madan C. Paul, includes 'common norm' and 'an ideology' (1997: 18). These two components are crucial in understanding the social and political system of the people or the group involved in the movement. The socio-political system of the tribes which is often termed as village republic may be illuminated in the studies of the principles and structures of the society that regulate 'common norm' and formulate 'an ideology'. In an inaugural address at the Social Scientists Meet of North East India in Kohima, M.M. Thomas pointed out the importance of studying social movements as a strategy to tackle various 'social, cultural, educational, economic, industrial, agricultural and political life' of the North-East region of India. To do this the social scientists were exhorted to study the impact of social movements on the aforesaid aspects of the region (1992: 20).

According to Antonio Gramsci, there may be two division of knowledge on social movements. One may be for the 'simple' movement participants in our own movements

³ Jawaharlal Nehru. The First War of Independence. *Mainstream* Vol. XLV No. 23, [May 25, 2007](http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article135.html). <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article135.html>. Retrieved on 13/1/2013 at 00:44am.

and for the elite in the universities (Cox and Fominaya 2009: 10). Knowledge on movements may be characterised into two categories. The first category of knowledge on movement may be represented by knowledge of the participants. The second category is the knowledge of those who study the movement. However, it is still very doubtful how efficient the knowledge of the tribal people would be when attempted to be fitted within the 'intellectual imperialism' of the more powerful groups. This apprehension is not unfounded considering the limited vocabularies and the means to generate a body of knowledge in the form of written forms with the absence of scripts of their own. The more mammoth task would be the effort to present a body of knowledge on movements in tribal region that are often scanned through the lens of threat to national security.

All social movements may be studied under the theme of collective actions, but not vice versa (Singh 2001: 35). T.K. Oommen confined social movement to collective actions (ed. 2010: 7). The works of academicians are also influenced by the political system of a nation. Their positions sometime depend on the state responses. According to Ghanshyam Shah, the approach of Indian scholars towards agitations against the imperialists during the freedom movement was that of approval. This changed during the post-independence period. Indian scholars, according to Ghanshyam Shah, disapproved various agitations that were witnessed during the 1950s and the 1960s. For the Indian scholars such collective actions were viewed as 'dangerous' and 'dysfunctional' for 'civilised society' (ed. 2002: 21-22).

Studies of culture of the tribes need to be undertaken with extreme academic sophistication. The difference between tribal belief systems and those of Hinduism, Christianity and other religions must be strictly maintained. The position of Indian scholars such as G. S. Ghurye on the tribes of India acted as a drawback in recognising the 'tribes as distinct and authentic groups' (Dangmei 2013: 27).

A Committee set up by the Government of India with B.N. Lokur as the Chairman has clubbed together tribes that shared 'some type of affinity in the past' based on ethnographic studies available. The Committee sidelined the 'self-ascribed current identity' which according to Frederik Barth (1962: 10, cited in Roy Burman 1994b: 2) was valid. Lokur Committee was set up to rationalise the list of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Roy Burman 1994b: 2). We often find tribes being studied by anthropologists. Emphasis on 'empirical study of cultures' has engendered aversion to events of past and to history among anthropologists and this is also one of the reasons for neglect of social movements which are of the

past (Bhardwaj 1977: 149), but very crucial in understanding the tribes. According to Gopal Bhardwaj, most of the available data on tribal movements are generated from secondary records (ibid.: 149). He further stated that apart from some limited attempts, 'fieldwork-based empirical studies' on tribal movements is 'practically non-existent' (ibid.: 150). The researchers like D.N. Majumdar, N.K. Bose, K.L. Bhowmik, M. Chakrabarti and D. Mukherjee despite their work on tribes have overlooked the theme of tribal movements. And even those studies available are mostly based on administrative records and documentary writings of the British who have prepared them with specific purpose. However, all these materials need to be taken into account by those who do studies on tribal movements (Bhardwaj 1977: 150).

Most of the studies on tribes carried out by anthropologists and administrators during the time of British and even in the early part of free India had emphasised on the life style, culture and religion of the tribes. They have often been viewed as group of people who need to be mainstreamed. Needless to reiterate, but G.S. Ghurye even considered the tribes as 'Backward Hindus' (1963). The socio-economic problems of the tribes have been the crux of most of the studies and thus sidelining their collective actions for collective political aspirations. Gopal Bhardwaj (1977: 151) claimed that the collective activities or social movements of the tribes are being termed as "political" or "law and order problems" that need to be tackled by politicians and administrators and not to be examined critically by researchers with a sincere academic interests. They thus, become secondary information generated by those who desire the movements to be suppressed. This further leaves scope for distortions or annihilations of truths. Such example may be cited from the controversies surrounding the First War of Indian Independence or the Sepoy Mutiny. This has rendered a body of knowledge on tribes deficient in some of the root causes of their problems that manifest in other spheres of their life. Often the results of the root cause are now begun to be viewed as the root cause of the problem and thus rendering the scope of uprooting the problems to a state of bleakness.

The absence of definition of the concept tribe in the Constitution is a severe drawback in tribal studies. India faces problem with regard to a number of Scheduled tribes. The variation between the list provided by the Government of India and the scholars sometime is due to the nature of listing the tribes. Some tribes are listed 'as synonymous or sub-tribes of main scheduled tribes' (Roy Burman (1994b: 1). For instance, in the Scheduled Tribes list issued by the Constitution (ST) Order 1950, the tribes of Nagaland were Garo, Kachari, Kuki, Mikir and Nagas.

However, in the state of Manipur the sub-tribes of Nagas are listed separately. Similarly, the Kuki sub-tribes are also listed separately (Roy Burman 1994b: 324 & 333). If the tribes of Manipur are listed in the manner they are listed in Nagaland, the total number would have been lesser. In Manipur, the Zeme and Liangmai who were earlier recognised as Kacha Naga are now recognised separately as Zeme and Liangmai, and the Rongmei and Inpui who were collectively recognized as Kabui are separately recognised. However, in both the cases the old names Kacha Naga and Kabui are also retained by the Government in the Scheduled Tribe list of Manipur. Thus, in Manipur the different four tribe i.e. Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui are now known by six different names- Kacha Naga, Zeme and Liangmai on the one hand and Kabui, Rongmei and Inpui on the other hand. This identity debacle of Kacha Naga, Kabui, Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui needs to be probed understood through examination of Zeliangrong movement critically.

There are divided opinions on the identity of Zeliangrong people believed to comprise three or four sub-tribes (whether it is three or four sub-groups is still open to debate among the so called Zeliangrong people). The source of their identity is entirely on oral narratives that vary across places, religions and generations. However, Zeliangrong movement under the leadership of Haipou Jadonang and Rani Gaidinliu played a crucial role in identity reclamation or transformation of the Zeliangrong people spread across the state of Nagaland, Manipur and Assam. Belief in common origin of the Zeliangrong people was emphasised in the Zeliangrong political movement for freedom from the rule of the British and later in free India for Homeland.

Zeliangrong movement

Zeliangrong is a group of people settled in the states of Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. Zeliangrong is a composite name formed by the first syllable of the names of three tribes. However, Zeliangrong is believed to represent four tribes. The four tribes represented by Zeliangrong are Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei and Inpui. The name Zeliangrong is formed by 'Ze' of Zeme, 'Liang' of Liangmai and 'Rong' of Rongmei on 15 February, 1947 (Kamei 2004: 176). They believe that they had common origin, culture, language, etc. The 'In' of Inpui was not inserted in the nomenclature, Zeliangrong as it was believed that the Rongmei and the Inpui were closer in relation. Some Zeliangrong people believe that the Inpui was formed by Rongmei people who were separated due to migration. This theory of the origin of Inpui is not conclusive and is open to further debates. Nevertheless, either of the syllables of Inpui is still not included in Zeliangrong. In the light of separate

recognition of Zeme and Liangmai, and Rongmei and Inpui, one may even claim that now Zeliangrong represent the six tribes- Zeme, Liangmai, Rongmei, Inpui, Kacha Naga and Kabui.

A brief exegetical study of Zeliangrong movement from some of the available literatures will serve the aim of eliciting the relation between studies of tribes and tribal movements. The literatures available on Zeliangrong people may be broadly classified into colonial, post-colonial and Zeliangrong. The first two may be said to present the etic or outsiders' perspectives and Zeliangrong literatures represent the emic or insiders' perspectives. The literatures of the colonial period are dominated by writings of the ethnographers and British administrators. The post colonial and Zeliangrong literatures on the movement may also be termed as Indian literatures on Zeliangrong movement. Some serious differences are also found even within the Zeliangrong literatures. Attempts are made to undo the interpretation of the colonial writings.

A holistic understanding of a movement is an indispensable key to understanding the tribe or sub-tribe associated with the movement. Kaka D. Iralu from Nagaland is not ready to accept the movement under the leadership of Haipou Jadonang Malangmei and Rani Gaidinliu as a Naga freedom movement and this is evident from his words on this movement which read as "This conflict was just a Zeliangrong uprising led by Gaidinliu in which not even all the Zeliangrong people were involved, not to speak of stretching it as far as the Indian national struggle!" (2009: 30). He further termed the movement as 'religio-political uprising' (ibid.: 30). However, another Naga, Asoso Yonuo, was of the view that the Zeliangrong movement set forth the stage for 'Naga nationalism' (1982: 80). Professor Gangmumei Kamei, who is a Rongmei Naga from Manipur, summed up the movement under Jadonang Malangmei as 'the Naga Struggle against the British' (2004: 145). It is interesting to note that Asoso Yonuo described the Zeliangrong movement as a precursor for 'Naga nationalism' despite the fact that Zeliangrong movement took a different position from the larger Naga struggle for sovereignty during the time of Rani Gaidinliu. The Naga movement at large was influenced by Christian teachings and ideology while reforming and reclaiming the traditional belief system were part of the objectives of Zeliangrong movement. The positions of Jadonang and Gaidinliu and thus the Zeliangrong at large were sometime questioned by the other Nagas in the context of Naga movement for sovereignty.

The words of Asoso Yonuo will help us draw an understanding of their positions in the larger Naga

movement for freedom under the leadership of Naga National Council (NNC).

Jadonang and Miss Gaidinliu were not against the stand of the Kohima Naga Club; yet their strategy, concepts and methods were different from the members of the Club on the same objective. By and large, they were reluctant to join hands immediately with other Nagas who were not advocating direct Naga independence with action and who were not condemning the introduction and spread of Christianity in their land. Moreover, at the time, they saw unity of all Naga tribes for a common goal was vitally lacking. So for them unity of Naga people was first and foremost (1982: 68).

Thus, we find that the later part of the movement of the Nagas under the leadership of NNC with Christian elements did not conform to objectives of Zeliangrong movement that also fought against the activities of Christians. Zeliangrong movement is not to be placed as an antithesis of Naga movement. The Naga movement is never termed as Christian movement or identity movement. However, it is observed that the Naga movement had a strong religious inclination. In the year 1958, the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN), in its Constitution, stated "Nagaland shall be a kingdom of Christ" (1965 Constitution) (Kamei 2004: 213). This posed serious problem for the non-Christian Nagas. The Article of the Constitution was amended, and a new Article 136 read as "Protestant Christianity and Naga religion shall be religion of Nagaland" (ibid.: 213; Namthiurei 2006: 38).

No literature is witnessed so far that dares to term the Naga movement as religious movement despite elements of Christianity strongly endorsed. The Convenor of Nagaland Prayer House stated 'Let the Nagas reconcile and stand solidly behind, "NAGALAND FOR CHRIST", and to send 10,000 Missionaries to preach the world the gospel of Christ' (Shapwon 2000: 116). It is always studied within the framework of political movement (see for example Dev 1988: 1-10). The Zeliangrong movement is not fortunate enough in this matter. Lucy Zehol view Zeliangrong movement as a movement to redefine the identity of the Zeliangrong (1998: 7, 68). Zeliangrong movement is also defined based on the name of the tribe of the people engaged in the movement. Sir Robert Reid (1937-42), the then Governor of Assam thus called the movement as 'rebellion' of the Kabui and Kacha Naga (Kamei 2004: 145). Namthiubuiyang Pamei (2001) had fair opinion on the roles of the Christians, but Gangmumei Kamei (2004: 283) accounted the role of some Christians who were against the Zeliangrong movement. A Rongmei village was traced to be the origin of Zeliangrong movement by Namthiubuiyang Pamei

(2001: 59). However, he contradicted when he avers that the Zeliangrong people remained passive for about five years long after the 'Naga Independence movement had picked up in the Naga Hills' (ibid.: 60). In the Manipur Administrative Report, covering the period from 1931 to 1932, the movement had been described as 'semi-military semi-religious and political form' (Kamei 2004: 152). Differences of opinions are witnessed among the Naga writers who are not Zeliangrong. For instance, Arkotong Longkumer (2010: 2) claimed that the name of Zeliangrong religion, 'Heraka', which was crucial in the movement under the leadership of Gaidinliu, was used in 1974. But Asoso Yonuo (1982: 53) traced the origin of the name 'Haraka' to Jadonang Malangmei who died in 1931. The Kukis, according to Gangmumei Kamei, had brutally slaughtered the Nagas and forcefully annexed their land (Kamei 2004: 146). The relation between the Kukis and the Nagas is also reflected in the words of T.S. Gangte. He claimed that, 'The Maharajahs of Manipur were contented with periodical massacre and extension of their influence for specific purposes. The Kuki Chiefs were their allies' (2003: 10). Such claim on the part of the Kukis to have collaborated with the Meitei Kings to attack the Nagas is not usual among the common people in the state Manipur where communal tension is serious in the light of the talk between NSCN (IM) and Government of India.

Conclusion

The debate on the authenticity of knowledge on tribal studies is an aspect that needs to be examined continuously with the evolution of new thoughts in academics and new political developments that influence the scholars and the common people differently. Theoretical standpoint must be closely related to perspectives from the tribes being studied rather than such stand being drawn from colonial legacies. However, the element of subjectivity too needs to be addressed both by insiders and outsiders. The conceptual problems are already immense in tribal studies. The cultural background and an affiliation of a scholar to particular tribal community are also found to influence studies on tribes. These contribute to varying perspectives on a movement from within the same tribal group. The absence of conclusive theoretical definition from the authority is a serious setback when the same authority plays an instrumental role in the political, cultural and economic aspects of the life of the tribal people. This is highlighted in the administrative category without any definition of the concept tribe. Tribal studies in the context of various movements will continue to engender more serious conceptual and theoretical questions. Some of the debates on tribes cannot be politically neutral and might require taking the risks of inviting the attention of the repressive force of the state.

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