CHAPTER V

THE THEORETICAL AND THE METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES
- Conceptual clarifications
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THE THEORETICAL AND THE
METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

I

In this chapter we discuss the sequence of theoretical and the methodological issues which appeared in course of the study. The issues related to (i) definitions, (ii) standpoints, and (iii) procedures.

The field observation - different communities in Manipur are involved with the process of defining-redefining their identity, took us to such issues like defining notion of 'tribe', 'ethnic groups', 'ethnicity'. Consequent to this appeared the issue to define the context with reference to which the field observations are being made. In operational terms, this involved the issue to adopting a model to represent the 'reality'. Every such 'model' has at its background a standpoint in terms of which the
'reality' is perceived. These two issues are primarily 'theoretical'. Along with these two appeared the issue of procedure, in other words, of methodology. In the present study this took us to comparative analysis.

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The issues which appeared for attention in the present study are normal for any social research. The discussions here on the issues will follow the sequence in which they appeared. In this chapter, when making our discussion on each of the issue, we will (a) identify the issue, (b) examine some of the main academic discussions relating to the issue, and (c) elaborate our approach to the issue.
The 'home experiences' of the investigator, who is an inhabitant of Manipur, and within it, one who belongs to the scheduled tribe, if this formed the etiology of the present study, the genesis of the present study, as mentioned earlier, is from the academic suggestions which emerged from the exercise undertaken as part of the M.Phil programme. The definition of the scope as well as the direction of the present study came, to a large extent, also, as mentioned earlier, from such observations as:

"Without detracting from the merit of these more recent works, it is apparent that a theoretical framework capable of informing comparative ethnic studies has not yet emerged." (Despers, 1975, op. cit. Emphasis added).

The exercise was directed towards formulating such a 'theoretical framework'. A clarification will need to be rushed here, relating to what involves 'a theoretical' framework. Any effort by a research student in doctoral dissertation 'towards theory construction' need not be taken as "trying to bite more than what you can chew", the effort is confined to the formulation of an analytical (conceptual) framework that will provide a base for systematising the mass of complex information.

Such definition of scope as well as that of direction of the study, took us to two questions:
(1) What involves an analytical framework (the content).

(2) What involves the procedure to formulate an analytical framework (the methodology)

Mason (1986) in his review of "controversies and continuities in race and ethnic relations theory" intended to explore "whether there were points of convergence or continuity between theoretical standpoints which might usefully be explored and exploited to the benefit of the subject as a whole". In his opinion, on this occasion, "the most obvious starting point .... is the question of theory itself. What do we mean by a theory of race or ethnic relations? It will become clear, from the brief perusal of the contents that the authors here have divergent views about the answer to that question .... For some a theory is a little more than a set of working concepts or hypotheses by means of which observations may be classified and ordered. For others a theory is a set of interrelated and structural propositions whose purpose is pre-eminently etiological. For some a social theory needs to be as complex as the phenomena to which it relates, while for others social theory should aim to meet the same criteria of inclusiveness, economy and elegance which is traditionally taken to be the hallmark of theory in the natural sciences. Yet others, while sharing this as an ultimate objective, are content to build towards such an objective by
means of smaller steps, what Merton would have called "theories of the middle range".

In the present study, the initial observation relating to that of ethnogenesis (the historical process whereby the identity of the different tribes has been constituted), and later, that how the different communities (the six experiences) are involved in the process of defining-redefining their respective identity, brought to fore two issues,

(1) that of adopting a definition of the notion of 'tribe', and
(2) that of defining the overall context (Structural ecology, for some authors) in which we perceive the collection of the six experiences.

This took us, in the parlance of social research, to issues relating to the definition of concepts, variables, and adopting a model. It is necessary that we elaborate in some detail to define these terms, and also on such methodological issues as 'adopting a model' and 'formulating an analytical framework'.

III

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

In our present discussion, these relate mainly to the definition of the section of the population involved in the process of definition-redefinition. In specific terms, the issue relates to definition of 'tribe', 'ethnic group' and 'ethnicity'.
Tribe

In our earlier exercise, as part of the M.Phil programme, we were able to note that there has remained considerable imprecision on the definition of the groups, in terms of distinction between 'tribe', 'clan', and 'sub-tribe'. It has been possible to identify between 1873 (Brown) and 1986 (Kamkhenthang), nine different schemes for the classification of the tribes inhabiting Manipur. (Refer Appendix for the different classifications). Some of the main features which come to notice are:

(a) Brown (1873), Dun (1886) and Hodson (1911) divide the tribes into two broad categories, the Naga and the Kuki. Shakespear (1812) refers to the Lushai Kuki Clans rather than the Lushai or the Kuki. Shakespear refers to "the many clans living in the hills tracts ..... of the Kuki race" (1812). He explains:

"The term Kuki, like Naga, Chin, Shendu, and many others, is not recognized by the people to whom we apply it, and I will not attempt to give its derivation, but it has come to have a fairly definite meaning, and we now understand by it certain closely allied clans, with well marked characteristics, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman stock" (p.1).

(b) Brown in 1873 identified 8 major tribal communities in Manipur, today, in 1981, the number has increased to 29, according to the official classification adopted by the Government of Manipur.
(c) It appears that Dun has multiplied the total number of distinct groups by including many more groups which hold village or lineage based identity rather than any distinct ethnic identity.

(2) In the present study, the issue relating to definition appeared when we came to defining the following:

(i) the definition of the Thadou vis-a-vis that of the Kuki. Do we consider the Thadou as a clan or a sub-tribe of the Kuki? Whatever decision we take, how do we define (a) clan, (b) sub-tribe.

(ii) In the Chin-Kuki-Mizo experience, how do we define, each of the three, namely, the Chin, the Kuki, the Mizo? In more specific terms, the question before us were;

(a) Do we consider each of the three, individually the Chin, the Kuki, the Mizo, as a 'tribe', in that case, what do we consider the double hyphenated group, the Chin-Kuki-Mizo? Also a tribe, or a bigger ethnic solidarity, within a larger territorial context.

(b) In case a common language, or more correctly, a language easily intelligible to each of the three is the factor for common identity of a tribe, then by referring to the 'local' cultural differences, what designation do we give to each of the three group?
(iii) In the Purum experience, how do we explain the sudden 'disappearance' of the Purum and the more prominent appearance of the Chothe? What do each of the two indicate - are the Purum and Chothe distinct 'tribe', or the Purum is only a clan of the Chothe?

(iv) In the Zeliangrong experience, how do we define each of the three, the Zemei, the Liangmei, and the Rongmei, are they tribes? In that case what designation will we give to the Zeliangrong? Also, that of a tribe? In such situation, what would we like to consider as the comprehensive definition of a tribe.

(3) The notion of 'tribe' has engaged the attention of the anthropologists nearly all through the history of the discipline, and without any conclusive results. The concept seems to have defied any standardized definition by the anthropologists all through. According to Notes and Queries on Anthropology (1960), "a tribe may be defined as a politically or socially coherent and autonomous group occupying or claiming a particular territory". In the International Encyclopedia of the social sciences there is an entry on "Tribal Society" according to which,

"In general usage, the work 'tribe' is taken to denote a primary aggregate of peoples living in a primitive or barbarous condition under a headman or chief. The unnecessary moralistic overtones that this usage implies can be avoided or minimized by the use of the expression "tribal society", which is to be preferred
to such synonyms as "primitive society" or "preliterate society". At the same time, the word "tribe" need not be discarded. Indeed, it has become a technical term denoting a territorially defined political unit, a usage that recall the original use of the word for the political divisions or patrician orders of the Roman state." (Lewis, 1968).

The existence of distinct social groups or cultural groups within societies is widespread, and ancient. It has occurred in the communities of Africa to those of modern United States. It has occurred from such ancient days as those of the Old Testament, to those of the years on the eve of the 20th century. At this point "it would be wise, for the sake of clarity, to make the distinction between a Social group and a social category. By a group (we) mean an aggregation of people recruited on clear principles, who are bound to one another by formal, institutionalised rules and characteristic, informal behaviour..... Members usually identify themselves with a group and give it a name. In practice social groups vary in the degree to which they are corporate, and in certain situations one of the principal difficulties of analysis may be to decide whether a particular social entity is in fact a social group or a mere category of the population, such as red-haired people, selected by a criterion that in the context socially neutral and that does not prescribe uniform behaviour". We find he later argues that "Ethnic divisions may simply be categories of the population as are Welshman, and Scotsman living in England, or Indians, Chinese, and Creoles in Mauritius, who are beginning to lose a
sense of ethnic separateness. It is, therefore, always important to be sure what is the exact sociological status of an ethnic or cultural division. Clarity in analysis depend upon it". (Morris, 1968: 167).

The issue before us, with such arguments, and also our own observations from Manipur, specially those emerging from the different schemes of classifications of the 'tribes' that have been made, are two:

(a) How to solve such issues as posed by Shakespear, when he relates about the Lushai-Kuki clan, and our own experiences, such as those of the Zeliangrong -

Distinguish between a clan, tribe, sub-tribe, and wider category such as the Kuki or the Zeliangrong.

(b) What criteria do we need to adopt in making the use of the terms 'tribe' and 'ethnic group'.

The answer to these questions came from a two stage clarification adopted by us. In the broader context we adopted a clarification as follows. Bearing in mind the nature of the field observation from Manipur, that of the communities involved in constant process of defining-redefining their respective identity, which suggested the themes for the present study, we will need to base our analysis in terms of the social category in terms of which the people identify themselves as belonging to a
particular group. We could note that such a position did not contradict with the position as adopted by Barth who perceived the situation in terms of boundary maintenance.

We also felt that for purpose of clarity it will be advisable not to press the academic, classical definition of a 'tribe'. On the contrary to adopt operational definitions for such notions as 'tribe' or ethnic group, and use the designations 'tribe', 'clan', 'sub-tribe', and 'ethnic group' synonymously, if band when necessary, but only after providing alongside the operational clarification.

Operational clarification, or adopting operational definition, involves 'to operate' the empirical observations in terms of certain distinctions which will help categorization, classification, and then ordering of the data. Such definitional functions only help to proceed to testing of hypothetical statements and formulation of an 'theoretical framework'. Deduction, induction, and retroduction are the three approaches to reasoning which lead the investigator from facts to theory. In methodological sense, deduction comprises the inferential processes inherent in making concepts measurable and hypotheses testable; i.e. the process of operationalization. Whenever a concept is operationally defined, its meaning is made more explicit and more specific. The term hypothesis in such stands refer, in fact, to the assumptions which the investigator makes in the outset.
Refering back to our field observations, we consider the Kuki as well as the Thadou, both as distinct tribe and sub-tribe at one point of analysis, and a tribe and its clan at another point of analysis. In the early history of these communities, the original group was the Kuki tribe, and of which the Thadou were only a clan, the population of which was spread to a cluster of villages, within a specified territory. In course of time, to be more specific, with the translation of the Bible in the Thadou dialect of the tribe (Kuki), there was the beginning of the process in which this dialect group, clan of the Kuki, started to consolidate itself as a group distinct from the rest of the Kuki community. At this point of history, for the purpose of analysis, we will need to designate the Thadou as a distinct tribe, with the explanation that it has emerged from the original Kuki tribe. We may view the situation from another position as well. In case the Thadou today would prefer to be identified as a group distinct from the other Kuki, who are we to prevent them from this.

IV

Ethnic Group

One of the issue before us, as well be clear from the foregoing discussions, related to 'substituting' (?) the notion of tribe or 'community' with that of 'ethnic group'. In this relation the specific issue were two;
(a) What defines an ethnic group, and whether it substitutes the notion of tribe and non-tribe communities such as the Meitei or the Bishnupriya?

(b) Does the use of the notion of ethnic groups foresee at some point of time later, the redundancy of the notion of tribe, say, in the context of Manipuri?

In the process of formulating reply to these queries, two situations drew our attention,

(i) Within Anthropology, what implies the traditions of 'ethnography', 'ethnology', and now the study of ethnicity. Note, the root 'ethnos' is common to each of the three.

(ii) The paradigm shift in anthropology, consequent to the publication of Ethnic Groups and Boundaries by Barth (1969).

In anthropology, in fact, we can identify a two stage paradigm shift, initially from early ethnography to ethnology and then to comparative analysis, and second phase of paradigm shift with the publication of the volume by Barth (1969). "An ethnographer is an anthropologist who attempts - at least in part of his professional work - to record and describe the culturally significant behaviour of a particular society". The early ethnographers based their generalizations about a 'particular society' on basis of observation from a micro-situation, often a village or the interview of a few knowledgable persons, as a result, the notion of the 'society' was never explicitly
ennunciated. What attracted attention was the culturally significant behaviour, rather than the 'boundary' of the society and the internal organization/structure which distinguishes it from others.

After 1945, with the end of the IIInd World War, there was a marked shift in the approaches of the ethnographers. As observed by Firth, the classical study material of the anthropologists seemed to be vanishing fast, and the anthropologists had to search for new subjects for purpose of their study, such as those of refined methodology, formulation of theories, the study of culture change. "Following the World War II, ethnography began to attract more theoretical and methodological attention". (Conklin, 1968, 174).

What comprises ethnology has three distinct sets of meaning, interestingly. While in the United Kingdom, ethnology is considered,

"The name 'ethnography' is generally used for purely descriptive accounts of a people or peoples. Ethnology goes beyond description. In the first place it seeks to provide a classification of peoples by comparing them with reference to their similarities and differences. People or ethnic groups resemble or differ from each other by racial characteristics, by language, and by their modes of life and mode of thought, from the kind of dwellings they inhabit or the kind of clothes they wear to the kind of beliefs they hold. Ethnologists distinguish between the racial characteristics of a people and their cultural characteristics and between racial and cultural classifications" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1958, III).
We may note, Radcliffe-Brown, who represents the interpretation as adopted in the United Kingdom, refers to race, peoples, and ethnic groups. This distinction, as we will note presently, has made a bearing on the present day perception and analysis of the ethnic phenomena.

In sharp contrast to the definition of ethnology in the United Kingdom, in continental Europe, ethnology refers to what comprises social anthropology in the United Kingdom. Much different from these two, in the United States, in the early years of Boas and Kroeber, ethnology referred to the study of evolution of the communities. Toward the end of the nineteenth century two schools of ethnology were founded, one by Boas in the United States and the other by Ratzel and Frobenius in Germany. Both schools emphasized the historical processes of diffusion and migration. In the United States, by the 50's, Murdock laid the foundation for cross-cultural studies, and through this, that of comparative analysis.

Such cross-cultural studies stem from the evolutionary interests of the nineteenth century. "The principal weakness of most cross-cultural studies so far is that their instances hop, skip, and jump across the map in such a manner that continuity of geographical distribution and other clues to genetic explanations are missing...... Although significant positive correlations in cross-cultural research are relatively easy to
find, casual relationships are more difficult to establish, and
the direction of causation is still more elusive.... Naroll
(1964) has drawn attention to the many problems surrounding the
nature of the ethnic unit used in cross-cultural research.
Because this is the unit counted in all intertrait cross-cultural
correlations, its definition is crucial to such studies.
(Driver, 1968: 184).

We may return to examine the answer to the two questions
posed earlier, relating to what constitutes ethnic groups, and
the redundancy of the notion of 'tribe' with increasing
analytical emphasis on ethnic group analysis. In view of the
foregoing discussions, and also on basis of our observations from
Manipur, a satisfactory characterization of a tribal society, we
feel, must concentrate upon criteria of form rather than of
content.

As regards the second question, that relating to the
redundancy of the notion of 'tribe', the straight answer this has
to be that 'such notions cannot be redundant as long as the
people identify themselves as such'. The paradigm shift that has
appeared among the anthropologists with the publication of the
volume by Barth (1969), the guiding argument is that "the
starting point for such an examination must be a recognition that
'ethnic group' are categories of ascription and identification by
the actors themselves'. With such guiding consideration, the
notion of 'tribe' will obviously never be redundant.
It may be interesting, more so, relevant to note here is that the paradigm shift from focus on tribe to that of ethnic groups, there has been a concurrent shift in focus from structural organizational considerations of the respective group, to processual experiences of intergroup relations. While the early ethnographers confined their attention to the structural features and cultural traits of a particular tribe, the paradigm shift took the attention to the processes of intergroup relations.

While such paradigm shift appeared in the perspectives of the social scientists, more so, that of the anthropologists, it is interesting to note that social analysts have not been able to distance themselves from issues relating to race identity. As result, any discussion on ethnic relations has invariably included a discussion on race relations as well. As Mason (1986) explains "The problems of origin has long dogged the study of many aspects of human behaviour. It takes on special significance in the field of race and ethnic relations...... Ethnicity may be a resource in the making of a group's history, but the process of categorization, of which racism is the most striking example in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, illustrates that the superior capacity of some groups to define the circumstances under which that history is made is a crucial feature of a symmetrical power relations". (Mason, 1986: 5).
Academic disciplines, like ethnography-ethnology, and so also analytical concepts, such as ethnicity - ethnic group relations, it will be interesting to note, in the realm of sociology of knowledge, carry their own history. Knowledge is society specific, time specific. "Traditionally, the plural society thesis has been seen as the principal example of the attempt to develop a special theory of race and ethnicity. (Mason, op. cit. 11). The notion of 'ethnic groups' over period of time, and in different soils, has referred to different category of groups. To the Western colonisers it referred by and large to the tribal communities in Africa, and Asia. The colonizers, and the academicians in communion with them, found the notion of race more convenient to refer to them. Across the Pacific, in the United States, the notion of ethnic groups takes attention to the cultural minority groups, like those with a Mexican or Italian, or similar origin, who have now settled in the United States. With the development of black resistance in the United States in the 1960's, such groups have also been identified now as ethnic group.

In the present study on Manipur, we note, the distinctiveness of identity, all that it can mean to the person(s) concerned, are clearly defined through two factors, territorial affiliation and that of language/dialect by the people. A Thadou distinguishes himself from the neighbouring Kabui on basis of the difference of language, and so also the
Bishnupriya distinguish themselves from the neighbouring Meitei on basis of their distinct dialect.

In Manipur, the language issue has found its most clear expression in the Thadou experience. Among the Kuki-Thadou, as Kamkenthang reports, the fissiporous tendency started when the Holy Bible was printed in 1960. The dialect in which it was published was the Thadou dialect of the Kuki group of people. The version of the Bible was however designated as the Kuki Bible. This initiated resentment from the other Kuki clans, such as the Paite, Gangte, the Vaiphei, the Zou, etc. These communities, distinct dialect groups, felt relieved to be known by their true tribal names. This is how they returned themselves in the Census of 1961, and later got their recognition through official notification of 1976.

The Chin-Kuki-Mizo appellation provides a good example of how territorial affiliation brings different name to the same cultural-linguistic group. The section of population which resides in Manipur have been known for long as the Kuki, while those who have inhabited the neighbouring Mizo hills are known as the Mizo, and those across the borders in Myanmar (Burma) are being designated as the Chin. To some extent the Purum experience also reveals how (it is apprehended, and thus explained by some scholars) that Purum is a territorial designation while Chothe is a cultural-linguistic designation.
On basis of the exposition provided by Danda (1991), the issue is still unconclusive.

With all such examples from Manipur, and the academic debate on the issue of identification of ethnic groups, we considered it operationally convenient to refer to each community which feels to be identified differently, as an ethnic group, such as the Chin, the Kuki, the Thadou, and the numerous others whose name has appeared in course of presenting the six experiences, as ethnic groups. The issue of defining the boundary of an ethnic group, in our opinion, is not to be decided in terms of any set criteria adopted by the analyst, on the other hand, it has to be in terms of how the people themselves feel the distinction between 'we' and 'they', the 'insider' and the 'outsider'.

V

Ethnicity

As regards this concept, same as in relation to the cognate concept of 'ethnic groups', we need to view it from the standpoint of (a) the content as well as (b) the context. In terms of content, ethnicity refers to an overt expression of feeling of differentiation, such as the situation of how the other Kuki group of peoples differentiated themselves from the Thadou. It is conscious, express feeling.

In social science literature we find extensive discussions on the notion of ethnicity, but a close look at these readily
reveal that the attention to this notion has refracted to diverse directions rather than going deep to an analysis of what implies it. Smith argues that ethnicity should not be treated as a givens, like primordial givens. As we note from the available discussions, every discussion which is intended to be on ethnicity, refracts to a discussion on ethnic group boundaries and identities.

Etymologically the term traces its origin from the term ethnic that relates to community of physical and mental traits possessed by members of a group as a product of their common hereditary and cultural traditions. According to Webster's Dictionary (1978), it is a noun from the expression ethnic, and refers to certain quality or affiliation based on heredity as well as cultural considerations. Winick's Dictionary of Anthropology does not include any entry like ethnicity as such. It has an entry on ethnic which refers to a group distinguishable by certain common cultural attributes, such as language. It is interesting to note such unconcern or marginal reference to the notion of ethnicity has continued with the social science disciplines, as result this far no comprehensive definition has been provided. The attempt here will be only exploratory rather than in any way conclusive or definitive. Danda notes that,

"Still it does not appear to have fulfilled all the conditions of becoming a standardized concept as the meaning it conveys is even now largely society-specific as well as time-specific and to a major extent depends upon the orientation of the society as such".

(Danda, 1991, p. 70)
As Danda has rightly summarized "by and large ethnicity is still presumed to be associated with the primordial system of categorisation". The issue is not what the notion of ethnicity implies in terms of the content, but the attention goes to the context in which the phenomena of ethnicity makes its appearance.