

# **Comparative Methodology and the Writing of History : Relevance for North East India**

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The use of the comparative methodology is not something unique for history writing. In fact in the Social Sciences in general there has been a long on-going debate on the use of the methodology beginning perhaps from Durkheim and Max Weber and continues even today. In fact the above scholars have been rightly regarded as the two sociologists who were among the leaders in comparative analysis. While trying to evolve a methodology of comparative analysis they faced a number of problems and their attempts to overcome them have provided guidelines for scholars even today.<sup>1</sup> However although both Durkheim and Weber made specific statements about their methodology for sociology, yet, as Neil Smelser puts it, "Each Statement was incomplete in many ways : for example, while both theorists assigned comparative sociological analysis a central place in their programmes for sociology, neither developed a detailed, explicit statement of strategies for comparative analysis."<sup>2</sup> But their deliberations on the matter have themselves remained instructive because those have pointed to the major problems of the methodology of comparative analysis. Even if one has differences with the Weberian or the Durkheimian approach to social analysis yet the tool of comparative analysis that they sought to use can be perhaps used profitably by social scientists from a wide cross section of ideological positions.

A simple definition of the comparative method would consider a study to be comparative when individual researchers or groups of researchers try and examine particular issues or phenomena in two or more instances with the specific purpose of comparing their appearances in different social and cultural settings. In doing this comparison a comparative analyst would have to use the same research instruments either to carry out secondary analysis of existing data or to conduct new empirical work with the aim of finding explanation for similarities or dissimilarities, to arrive at certain generalizations or to get deeper understandings of existing social realities. Such comparative studies could be between one or more nations, within the country or between different communities. Such studies could include phenomena like institutions, customs, traditions,

value systems, lifestyles, languages, and the like. Thus comparative research methods are used to identify, analyse and explain similarities and differences across societies.<sup>3</sup> An important characteristic of the comparative methodology is that it can provide an analytical framework for examining and explaining social and cultural differences and it can also establish whether an institution or a special feature shared by different societies can be explained by the same causes. "Thus identifying similarities and differences can give possible guides to causation."<sup>4</sup> It is also necessary to remember that the comparative method does not use a 'what if' method but compares already existing situations.<sup>5</sup> For instance Max Weber took up a comparison of different societies in order to ascertain why capitalism emerged first in Western Europe and not elsewhere. In his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Weber tries to understand the relationship between ideas and social change particularly at the realm of religious ideas. Weber therefore tried to set certain models for comparative research as a tool to understanding various social phenomena. Together with Weber, Emile Durkheim too is regarded as one of the foremost comparative analysts in the history of sociology.<sup>6</sup> Both Weber and Durkheim "faced a number of common problems that arise in comparative analysis, and attempted to overcome them in ways that are still instructive."<sup>7</sup>

Comparative studies, as a tool of social analysis, have thus been in practice since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and have influenced scholars in various branches of the Social Sciences. Amongst the historians one of the very staunch and early believers in comparative methods was Marc Bloch. Bloch claims that his interest in the comparative method, which was derived from Henri Pirenne, involved "comparisons with a single country or between different countries."<sup>8</sup> These kinds of comparisons which highlighted both similarities and differences could be a "source of new syntheses, new questions, and sometimes convincing answers."<sup>9</sup> The end product of such a methodology could be seen in his famous work, *Feudal Society*, which reflects the many types of sources that he had familiarized himself with and the different methodologies he had internalized. Thus although Bloch also used methods like the regressive method for analytical purposes yet his belief in the importance of the comparative method runs through almost all his writings. It is clear from this that comparing various similar and also dissimilar situations it is possible to arrive at clearer understanding of social realities, many aspects of which otherwise may have confused scholars. One need not necessarily

agree with the conclusions that Durkheim and Weber arrived at about social phenomena but it is quite possible to appreciate the innovations in their methodology. The primary theoretical objective of comparative research is not theory testing but concept formation, elaboration and refinement, and theory development.

Use of the comparative methodology becomes more pertinent for societies of the past (or even in the case of present developments) where there may be either a dearth of available sources or which present phenomena which confound the researcher. For instance many of the societies in Indian's North East even today present certain features which on a cursory look might tempt the historian or the researcher to call them unique. But we know today that this unique history phenomenon is a historical fallacy. One only has to widen one's horizons to realize that what looks to be unique is in reality a phenomenon which has existed elsewhere under similar conditions or may be slightly different conditions and which for various reasons may have traversed through different routes of historical development. This is where cross-cultural, cross-community or cross national comparisons come in handy. As an example if we look at two regions in North East India, the present day states of Mizoram and Meghalaya, we are faced with an interesting situation particularly in studying the history of traditions and traditional institutions in these two societies. In Mizoram we see a historical situation where the traditional institutions were abolished under the leadership of an articulate section of the Mizo society. In the case of Meghalaya a similar articulate section of the Khasi-Jaintia society however is constantly building up pressure to safeguard and in fact keep functional the traditional bodies. In our study of the politics of the tribal traditional organizations, often called traditional institutions, of the Khasi community of Meghalaya and its consequences for democratic governance we have shown that the values of the traditional politics and the values of the constitutional governance adopted by independent India have been making inroads into each others domains in a manner that neither the traditional system of governance nor the modern democratic governance could function properly, creating a crisis of governance.<sup>10</sup> Mizoram experiences seem to unfold a different dimension of the problem. Mizoram, is always presented by Government of India as the shining example of success against insurgency or extremist politics. In fact the government of India had tried to use the services of the earlier Mizoram Chief minister, Mr. Zoramthanga, to bring about a Mizoram type of peace in Nagaland and also with the two important militant groups of Meghalaya (Achik

National Volunteer Force and the Hynneiwtrep National Liberation Council.<sup>11</sup> But did this mean an end to all challenges to the democratic way of life? Merely accepting the norms of elected governments may not be a sufficient marker of the fact that those values which in reality can uphold a democratic way of life had actually taken roots in the society. It is necessary to also try and assess whether the traditional values which had been important parts of the history of the society were compatible with the modern democratic norms or whether those traditional value systems had been completely uprooted.

Doubts about the success story of democratic values in Mizoram definitely emerge if we glance through the recent social and political happenings in Mizoram. Reports in the print media present some empirical evidence of the disturbing state of affairs today and the societal perceptions about this situation can be gleaned from a series of interviews that we conducted on the field. The preliminary conclusions that we can draw from these two exercises do not give us a very encouraging picture of the state of democracy in the state. The challenges to the democratic system established by the Constitution of India are tell tale, and the ethno-centricity and exclusivist tendencies of politics and society, and the civil society responses to this phenomenon are indeed worrying signs for the future of democracy there. Since success of democracy lies in the internalization of democratic values in a society, which in turn has direct co-relation with development, it is necessary to examine the present day value systems in Mizo society.

Unlike Meghalaya, where in a historical perspective Traditional Institutions (TIs)<sup>12</sup> which appear to have taken a structural form along with the gradual introduction of British rule, are today competing for autonomy and power with the Indian democratic system, Mizoram had traditional institutions (chieftainships) well established long before the advent of British rule. However this institution of chieftainship was abolished by the Indian Government under pressures that came from within the Mizo society and today no political party or civil society organization is demanding a revival of the traditional institution, but what is interesting to note is that there is a noticeable persistence and strengthening of many of the values which had been dominant in the society when ruled by the TI and this definitely should cause concern for anyone interested in the prevalence of a democratic society as against authoritarian control. This also raises the issue of the consequences of the revival of authoritarian values.

The most acceptable information that we have of the traditional political systems in Mizoram is of the Lushai though the gradual availability of information about the other tribes makes it clear that their systems were not very different from that of the Lushais. In the traditional system of governance the chief was considered, in most cases, the final authority in the village. He was paid tithes by his subjects and in many instances he could even take over the properties of his subjects. In Lushai customs the person of the chief was considered sacred and therefore there could be no tolerance of disobedience to the chief.<sup>13</sup> The British tried to control the areas through the chiefs, curtailing some of their traditional powers which they considered inconvenient for them, and endowing them with new powers where necessary. As a result, although the chiefs maintained their authoritarian mode of functioning vis-à-vis their subjects, in their relationship with the British they became intermediaries between the colonial rulers and the people representing the British to the people rather than vice-versa. Thus neither the British administrators nor the Christian missionaries were interested in bringing about any basic changes in the traditional Institutions except of course when it suited their purpose. A new social elite, western educated and Christian, that began to emerge with the proselytisation work of the Christian Missionaries, which was carried forth through the introduction of modern education, and the opening of new opportunities that the British administration offered, began to chafe under the authoritarian rule of the chiefs. It was the representatives of this new social group that formed the first political party in Mizoram called the Mizo Union in 1946 and raised demands for the removal of obstacles in their path of development. The birth of the Mizo Union actually signaled the beginning of a new politics in the area. The leaders of this party, mainly Lushai educated men, sought to integrate all small tribes under the banner of Mizo identity. The leaders of this party were also exposed to some of the ideas of the Indian nationalist struggle, and they launched a movement for the abolition of the institution of Chieftainship. Together with this movement the leaders of the Mizo Union also made claims for direct administration of the Lushai Hills with representations in the provincial legislative assembly of Assam (of which it was a part at that time). In fact it was the Mizo Union leaders who chose the new name Mizo in place of Lushai<sup>14</sup> to give their movement wider acceptance in the areas inhabited by the different tribes and where the chiefs ruled. From 1946 to 1952 the Mizo Union raised demands that would curtail the powers of the chiefs and free the people from performing all those services which the chiefs traditionally demanded.

In the new circumstances the newly emerging educated elite could see the necessity of breaking with the past and therefore created conditions for introduction of democracy. But the same elite is now trying to revive and reinforce the values that were a part of the traditional society. As was made clear to us by some of the informants during the period when we conducted interviews in Mizoram concepts like *tlwamngainah* today do not mean exactly what it meant in the past. Two young Mizo women, one of them a social activist and the other a researcher told us that *tlwamngainah* now means going with the wind or not opposing the wishes of the community. In that sense it is close to the idea of consensual domination.

The politics of the organizations like the Young Mizo Association and the appeal to tradition now help the educated elite to pursue its goals. It can mobilize the "Mizo" community behind it to control the public space which is essential for controlling the public resources under disposal of the government. Though peace seems to prevail yet increasing demands made by smaller and virtually subjugated indigenous communities and the attempts of the dominant ethnic elite to monopolise the public space and to use coercion to silence dissent threatens to usher in an era of serious conflicts. In the process the functioning of democracy seems to be in for serious trouble. Our investigation shows that the problems that Mizoram faces and is likely to face are closely connected to the instrumental use of tradition by the dominant elite. In this sense the situation in Mizoram is similar to that of Meghalaya despite the fact that the newly emerging elites in the two states adopt two different approaches to the traditional political organizations of their respective pasts. The Khasi did not abolish the traditional political institutions but allowed those to co-exist with the institutions of constitutional democracy thus creating a situation of multiplicity of institutions, resulting in a process of conflicts and adjustments. In comparison Mizoram has a very complex situation. The modern elite abolished the formal traditional political institutions but allowed the traditional social and political values to continue, though at times those were redefined to suit the contemporary dominant interests.

Thus the use of the comparative methodology to understand the concepts of traditions and traditional institutions in the two societies mentioned above throws up very interesting insights into the whole question of traditions and traditional values and their significance in the histories of societies. The special features of traditions and their historical

contexts in Mizo societies would definitely become more explicit if studied in comparison with the question of traditions and traditional institutions in the Khasi-Jaintia society. The former is an example of decline of traditional institutions and the revival of traditional values while the latter provides us with the phenomena of survival and attempts to strengthen traditional institutions. In an earlier paper published in NEIHA proceedings volumes we had discussed how in various societies the world over, in as dispersed areas as African countries and Scotland for instance, the history of traditions showed a great degree of instrumentality. Comparative studies like those of Mizo society and the Khasi-Jaintia provide us the tools for developing the concepts of why societies decide to do away with certain traditions but try to uphold others, while some societies cling to various institutions termed by them as traditional. Use of the comparative methodology would therefore help historians to understand the significance of social institutions and social norms in different historical contexts by analyzing the similarities and dissimilarities of specific phenomena and therefore such a methodology could go a long way in helping historians understand better material conditions which have structured different social institutions.

#### *Notes and References*

1. See Neil Smelser, *Comparative methods in the Social Sciences* (Prentice Hall, 1978), Chapter 3.
2. *Loc. Cit.*
3. See L. Hantrias & Mangen (eds), *Cross-National Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (Pinter, 1996), for this further discussion on the key aspects of comparative methodology.
4. "The comparative method" in <http://www.rouncefield.homestead.com/files/as-soc.method-16.htm>.
5. See *ibid.*
6. This aspects of Durkheim is discussed in details in Neil Smelser, *op. cit.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (London, 1970), p. 73.
9. *Loc. Cit.*

10. See, working papers nos. 22, 39 and 52 of the working papers series no. 1, crisis states programme, LSE, Destin.
11. Local daily newspapers of the region has carried details of this. See, *The Assam Tribune*, 16<sup>th</sup> May, 2002, 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2004, 24<sup>th</sup> June, 2004, *The Telegraph*, 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2004.
12. All tribal organizations and authorities, perceived to be rooted in traditions, are referred to as Traditional Institutions in India's North East.
13. A.G. McCall, *Lushai Chrysalis* (1949, rep. 2003), p. 40.
14. S.K. Chaube, *Hill Politics in North East India* (1973), p. 175.