



## What is in a Name? Indigenous Identity and the Politics of Denial in Bangladesh

EVA GERHARZ  
[eva.gerharz@rub.de](mailto:eva.gerharz@rub.de)

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Dear friends, with a heavy heart, I have to say goodbye to you all as I, along with many other fellow Bangladeshis, no longer exist in this country! As some of you may have come to know by now also, our government, through a press note released yesterday, has reminded everyone that there are no indigenous people (Adivasi) in this country since the word itself is not in the constitution! The government has particularly requested academics, newspaper editors and other members of the civil society to refrain from using the 'A' word in seminars, talk shows etc. being organized as part of observance of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples tomorrow, August 9. As someone who belongs to one of many 'small' ethnic groups that have sought recognition as 'indigenous peoples', and as an anthropologist who has supported this demand through various articles since 1993, it seems that it is now time for people like us to go back to where we came from (we are supposed to be 'immigrants' compared to the Bengalis, said to be the true 'sons of the soil' of this country). After all, you cannot argue with powers that say, 'The constitution does not mention you. Therefore you do not exist.', or have been heard saying, in the past, 'We want the land, not the people.' Thus, as I walk into the sunset of an identity that seems doomed, let me say, so long! Perhaps we will meet again. If you meet someone with labels like 'backward', 'tribe', 'minor race' or 'ethnic sect' – terms that the constitution does approve of – look closely. It might be someone you have known by another name, at another time.

This statement was issued on Facebook by one of my friends on August 8, 2014. Within a few hours, it received more than 400 'likes' and more than 100 comments. Users belonging to Bangladesh's so-called indigenous population, along with users from all over the



country, Europe, and other parts of the world, expressed their sympathy or raised more controversial questions. The immense attention that this statement received underlines the urgency of examining issues of indigenes within the body politic of Bangladesh; such urgency may seem strange initially, because less than three percent of the total population fall under the category labelled by activists as 'indigenous'. At the same time, readers familiar with the topic may be reminded of the debates that have taken place with remarkable continuity over the last two decades: the question of whether the term 'indigenous people' can be applied in the Bangladeshi context was raised as early as 1993.<sup>1</sup>

The statement above shows that the recognition of indigenous people by the state continues to be a crucial demand in identity politics in contemporary Bangladesh. Its significance stems from multiple discrimination experiences, structural inequalities and the fear of being exterminated by the state, which protects and promotes the interests of the ethnic majority. The aim of the activist movement that has emerged in Bangladesh during the last couple of years is to address these inequalities and pursue the state to implement appropriate policies. This paper will show that the concept of indigenous people is of central importance for this aim.

Why do activists today insist on indigeneity as a category of self-ascription? The above statement shows that the government offers alternative terminologies, such as 'minor race' or 'ethnic sect', the connotations of which are less depreciative than the terms 'backward' or 'tribe'— concepts which were predominant earlier and continue to dominate debates in other contexts, as well as official debates. What difference do these categories make? My Facebook friend apparently prefers 'indigenous people' over alternative labels, but the usefulness of this term has also been controversially discussed. 'Indigenous people' may imply "the return of the native", as Adam Kuper has provocatively glossed it in his much-cited article (Kuper 2003). He argues that the label of 'indigenous people', as promoted by the United Nations (UN), restores the "ghostly category of 'primitive peoples'" and raises problems pertaining to ancient yet threatened lifestyles (ibid: 389). In essence, Kuper argues that the newly established notion reproduces the derogatory connotation of colonialist labels because it rests upon the general European belief that citizenship is a matter of ties of blood and soil, and therefore is nothing more than old wine in new bottles.



Many notable scholars support Kuper's assumptions and seek to illustrate what Alpa Shah has convincingly termed the "dark side of indigeneity" (Shah 2007). The notion's essentialising preoccupation with priority and ownership is particularly troubling because it draws clear-cut demarcations between those who enjoy certain privileges and those who are excluded (Geschiere 2009). Furthermore, Shah shows that local appropriation of the global discourse on indigeneity maintains a class system and leads to the marginalisation of the poorest. Taking up the various critical argumentative strands, Clifford (2013) reminds us that indigenous movements need to be located in shifting power relations and that the histories of conquest and hegemony must be considered. He further proposes the notion of "indigènitude" to capture the "vision of liberation and cultural difference that challenges, or at least redirects, the modernising agendas of nation-states and transnational capitalism" (Clifford 2013: 16) which has developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Seen from this angle, the notion of indigeneity can be regarded as a concentration of sources of identity formation and projects of identity politics that operates on multiple scales – from local traditions to national agendas and symbols to transnational activism. With such a relational approach, indigeneity becomes more than a potentially dangerous political project because it opens new avenues for researching the tension between loosened imperial and national hegemonies and globalising neoliberalism – which in turn offers new opportunities for indigenous activism (ibid: 17) to lobby for the recognition of minority rights, social inclusion and the alteration of existing inequalities.

In particular, the potential of the concept of 'indigènitude' for fighting existing inequalities within and beyond nation-states has been highlighted. Part of this potential lies in its functional dimension, i.e. its relevance for delimiting the scope of international instruments which proclaim either the rights of indigenous people or the duties of states in relation to indigenous people (Kingsbury 1995: 13). It thus provides an entry point for activists to relate to more or less legally binding international laws, treaties and conventions and opens avenues to put pressure on the state with the help of transnational activist alliances. These networks provide spaces and channels through which an "indigenous voice" (Tsing 2007) is articulated. Despite certain complications and limitations, these networks certainly lend support to local activists in a variety of ways (cf. Gerharz 2012; 2014a for the Bangladesh case). Moreover, I will argue in this paper that the discursive dimension of indigènitude, the international language of indi-



genous people, widens activists' room to manoeuvre and their scope not only for claiming the mitigation of inequalities but also for ensuring dignity and self-assurance for a discriminated section of citizens within the nation-state. Instead of embarking on critical perspectives and judgements, I thus take Clifford's observations as a starting point for the analysis and consider indigènitè as a social fact which requires investigation itself.

In particular, I look at the ways in which this global project becomes relevant on national and local scales. Therefore, I try to resist the temptation to categorise the population which activists today label as 'indigenous' but look instead at the debate that has evolved around the various terms and concepts to do with the issue. By tracing the different denominations and concepts, as well as the politics behind them, from a historical perspective, the aim of this article is to elucidate the contestations and struggles over 'claiming' and 'naming'. In doing so we can begin to perceive the power relations between the actors involved.

The first part of the paper deals with some contextual issues and traces major historical developments in ethnic divisions in South Asia. The second part shows how the discourse of indigenous belonging has evolved in East Pakistan and Bangladesh; its main focus is on the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), located in the southeast, where the majority of indigenous people live. In the third section, this paper looks into the contestations over the concepts and various denominations of groups whom my Facebook friend refers to as 'indigenous people' that have emerged since Bangladesh's independence and how these are related to the politics of nationalism. The evolution of a translocal activist movement in relation to the UN initiative for the rights of indigenous people constitutes the fourth part, followed by a section that reveals the activists' strategies at the national level and the response of the state. The conclusion raises some questions concerning future prospects.

### **The South Asian Context**

Since colonialism, South Asia's ethnic and religious diversity has been subject to efforts to order, classify and categorise it. Colonial administrators, missionaries, orientalists and, later, anthropologists created images of South Asian society which rely upon static, timeless and spaceless features (cf. Bal 2007: 24). The bewildering variety of people as well as their social, cultural and religious practices became



subject to analysis, mostly in racial terms. Closely related to this project, which primarily aimed to facilitate administrative rule by providing systematic information about society, was the creation of hierarchical orders. This process also involved an essentialising of groups of people which held them to display inherent, heritable, persistent or predictive characteristics and which thus had a biological bias.<sup>2</sup> In addition to modernist differentiations between civilised Europeans and primitive Asians, internal hierarchical orders were set up, and these led to the formation of colonial categories – which became subject to post-colonial critique later on.

These categorisations have resulted not only in an extraordinary, obstinate persistence of racial thinking in the South Asian region but also in the manifestation of differences between majority and minority populations. From the beginning the latter, usually labelled as 'tribal' populations, have fascinated anthropologists, who seek to study their customs, practices and institutions – attempts which are embedded in modernist images of society, where the 'tribal' represents the original and pure way of life, unpolluted by the influences of modernity. Seen as representing an early stage of evolution, tribal societies are regarded as isolated, self-contained and primitive social formations (Béteille 1998: 187; van Schendel 2011).

Such concepts were considered as scientifically safeguarded and informed post-colonial attempts to create independent nation-states according to the Western model. Alongside ideas of race, the significance of blood and soil determined the visions of early nationalists in South Asia of what a nation-state with the potential to advance to civilised levels should look like. The idea of homogeneity was of crucial significance within these visions. In the newly founded nation-states of India and Pakistan, thus, clear demarcations between the more or less culturally homogeneous national majority population and so-called minority populations were drawn. Whereas the major political divisions within the continent existed between Muslims and Hindus, each of them constituting a majority/minority in the newly founded nation-states, the so-called tribal population initially fitted into neither category.

When the subcontinent was divided into India and Pakistan, the boundaries between the two religiously defined 'communities' became fixed and were equated with the borders of the nation-state, and 'tribal' populations began to be regarded as minorities within the nation-state. The clear demarcations, which also implied hierarchical



orders, left very few options open to the 'tribal minorities'. Facing exclusion and severe marginalisation or, as is the case in India, more or less paternalistic policies for inclusion with the help of affirmative action have left indigenous populations little space to challenge widening social and economic inequalities. In the light of post-colonial modernisation projects, these gaps have widened even further, and in many parts of South Asia indigenous populations have become either mere 'victims' of development projects (for example, through eviction) or their explicit subject. Both processes have determined the fate of a large portion of Bangladesh's indigenous population since the departure of the British colonisers from the continent.

### **The Bangladeshi Case**

The various groups to whom my Facebook friend and supporters of indigenous activism refer as 'indigenous' differ from the mainstream Bengali population in linguistic, cultural and religious terms and live scattered all over the country with some concentrations in the northern part. Several of these groups share cultural similarities with populations in India, such as the Garo, Khasi, Santal, Koch and others. In the areas populated by these groups, land reforms and demographic changes in particular regions have had a particularly troubling impact on people's living conditions (Barkat et al 2009; Bleie 2005; Bal 2007).

While these populations, usually referred to as 'plain land Adivasi', now form majorities in small pockets of the region at best, indigenous populations used to be the majority in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), a hilly region in the southeast of Bangladesh, bordering Myanmar and the Indian states of Mizoram and Tripura. Colonial attempts to secure control over the CHT territory enforced a policy that was based on the maintenance of traditional institutions. The so-called CHT Regulation of 1900 thus proposed an administrative structure to rule the area and to guarantee the collection of taxes; however, this entailed protectionist measures. Without the permission of the deputy commissioner, no foreigner was allowed to enter or reside in the CHT (Shelley 1992: 77). This measure has always been highly controversial. On the one hand, it has been argued that it served primarily the interests of the colonisers and excluded the people living in the CHT from developing a market economy. On the other hand, indigenous activists have praised the Regulation for protecting the people of the CHT from exploitation and the intrusion of outsiders.



When the subcontinent was divided into India and Pakistan, the CHT was allocated to Pakistan. This went together with a gradual dilution of protective measures, followed by the implementation of a large-scale modernisation project. The area was officially labelled a project area for economically useful development (van Schendel 1992: 116), which implied massive transformations in agricultural policies.<sup>3</sup> Slash and burn cultivation (jhum), which was the traditional mode of agricultural production for subsistence and countertrade, had been regarded as backward under colonial rule and was further discouraged. Rubber plantations were established instead, and a huge industrialisation project led to the construction of both a paper mill and a hydroelectric project. The latter was completed in 1963 with the help of foreign aid, and its water reservoir swallowed up almost half of the land suitable for plough cultivation, which was already scarce, and forced more than 100,000 people to flee the area. Only about one third of the lost land has been compensated for (Mohsin 1997: 114).

Although it was expected that the area and the people living therein would experience a considerable economic uplift, the opposite happened: the indigenous population got very little access to emerging economic niches in the industrial, agricultural and fishing sectors. A survey conducted in 1979 showed that 93 percent of the indigenous population considered their economic condition to have been better before the construction of the dam (ibid.: 116).

In the aftermath of the construction of the dam, activism developed in the CHT, and a political leadership emerged which attempted to represent the interests of the indigenous population. The major issue was the protection of minority rights in political and social, as well as economic, terms. With the country's independence from Pakistan in 1971, the nation-building project put much emphasis on the linguistic, economic and political autonomy of the Bengali-speaking population. This further exacerbated the marginalisation of minorities and led to unequal majority–minority relations. Initial attempts to implement protective measures for minorities were turned down by the government. While the interests of the groups in the plain land, who also call themselves 'Adivasi',<sup>4</sup> were mainly incorporated into the country's leftist movement, nationalist policies led to an armed conflict between the Government of Bangladesh and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS—United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts), which sought to fight for the autonomy of the CHT region.





Parallel to the political articulation of the hill people's demands, local youths made an attempt to protect their rights with the help of weapons left over from the liberation war (Mohsin 1996). In the context of increasing polarisation, these local militant forces, who called themselves Shanti Bahini, were incorporated into the PCJSS as its military wing. The Bangladeshi state tended to regard the CHT mainly as a security problem and challenged the insurgency movement with massive militarisation and the re-settlement of landless Bengalis from the plain land. This led to the large-scale eviction of indigenous people from the communally owned land. More than 25 years of armed conflict resulted in severe human rights violations, including "massacres, torture, rape, illegal detention, looting, arson, forced labour, forced marriages and forced conversion to Islam" (Arens 1997: 1817). In addition, more than 70,000 hill people fled to India; many more were internally displaced. Only in 1997 was a peace accord signed and this armed conflict brought to an end.

### **Nationalist Ideologies of the State and the Politics of Naming**

Why do you Bangalis call us upajati<sup>5</sup> (sub-nation)? We have a language, culture, religion and land of our own. We may be few in numbers, we may be a small nation but we are not sub-anyone. We are egalitarian people. Please don't impose your notions of hierarchy upon us; these are alien to us. (Roy 2003: 179)

The activist who shared his thoughts with the late Chakma Raja Tridiv Roy captured the issue in a nutshell: with the country's independence in 1971, nation-building attempts based on Bengali nationalism institutionalised the hierarchical relationship between the Bengali population and others. This process, however, did not come out of nowhere and instead must be seen in connection with both colonial policies and the rule of Pakistan. In his memoirs, Raja Tridiv Roy convincingly argues that the introduction of alternative modes of agricultural production, e.g. plough cultivation and the concept of private property, had already paved the way for the "erosion of the Hill people's communitarian and egalitarian way of life" (Roy 2003: 179). This went along with the introduction of the general term 'tribal' to denominate the hill population as well as, to some extent, the Adivasi population in the plains.

With industrialisation under Pakistani rule, this process extended further, and the abolition of the CHT's special status as a Wholly Excluded Area paved the way for Bengali intrusion. Paradoxically, this





came about through an attempt to grant the people of East Bengal the benefits of democracy with elections to the provincial legislature in 1954. The Pakistani government had decided to include representatives from the CHT in these elections, but this also meant that the provincial assembly could interfere in the affairs of the CHT. Tridiv Roy states: "We were afraid that under the guise of democracy the government would take away the already attenuated safeguards the hillmen enjoyed and the complicated and myriad rules and laws of the province would be made applicable to the Tracts" (Roy 2003: 148). The politics of Bengali nationalism, thus, were already quite powerful in East Pakistan, and the system of governance allowed these political forces to work towards the marginalisation of the indigenous population.

Bengali nationalism rests on the assumption that nation-building is a matter of defining the "core-nation" in ethno-cultural terms, thus "nationalising nationalism" (Brubaker 1998: 277). The independence movement and also the first government grounded their claim for an independent nation in the idea that Bengali language and culture constitute the markers that define belonging to the nation. As a consequence, the non-Bengali-speaking and culturally diverse populations were subordinated to the national population and turned into 'Upajati'. This is supported by the famous utterance of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the independence movement and Bangladesh's first prime minister, in response to the PCJSS leadership's assertion of its worries over the threat of extinction: "From this day onward the tribals are being promoted into Bengalis" (Mohsin 1996: 44). This invitation to assimilate completely ignored the indigenous people's demand for recognition of their distinctiveness, and its ignorance reaffirmed the assumed hierarchical relationship.

Terms like 'tribal' and 'Upajati' rest on the assumption that there is an idea of unity manifested in the overarching identity-label of 'indigenous people' in Bangladesh or in the CHT. Historical accounts similarly prove that the distinction between plains and hills also led to collectivising denominations such as 'Pahari' (hill people). In the Chittagong region, Bengalis also used terms such 'Joomas'<sup>6</sup> and 'Kookies', as well as 'Mug', to refer to the hill people (van Schendel 1992: 100). But for the people themselves there was little unity; rather, the members saw their group as the primary identity category. This continues to be the case today to a great extent, because the linguistic, religious and cultural diversity among the indigenous population itself is extreme, and internal frictions manifest in hierarchies between more or less powerful groups in either socio-economic terms or in terms of their ability to



articulate their claims in the political arena. Being a Chakma, Marma, Mro or Lushai is thus more important in people's everyday lives than collectivising notions.

When the Government of Bangladesh turned down the demands of the indigenous population for recognition in the early 1970s and political as well as militant activism intensified, new ideas emerged. In order to mobilise public support for the PCJSS, secure its backing by all groups living in the CHT, and bring forward claims for all non-Bengali-speaking people living in the CHT, the organisation needed to find a common identifier. The term 'Jumma', which means swidden cultivator, was chosen because the practice of swidden (shifting) agriculture seemed to be the common denominator among the various groups. Moreover, emphasising this traditional mode of cultivation relates to (post-)colonial efforts to transform agricultural production and turns them upside down. Instead of denoting the backwardness of swidden cultivation, Jumma nationalism relates this practice to pride and collective self-confidence. It thus stands in sharp opposition to the Bengali population and clearly demarcates the ethnic boundaries between 'us and them'. It can also be regarded as the first serious attempt to invent an indigenous model of state, society and culture (van Schendel 1992: 121).

The fact that the practice of shifting cultivation is placed at the core of this new identity category also signifies a special relationship to the land. While for the PCJSS, and particularly its armed wing, it served as a justification to construct the CHT as a homeland which needs to be protected, van Schendel (ibid.) highlights an inherent paradox. He states that the connection between nation and land is not traditional among shifting cultivators because they used to consider land as a free gift of nature and not as a possession. Territorial thinking only developed in response to proprietary claims by the British and their successor governments, along with the introduction of private property rights in land and the exploitation of national resources. In his article, van Schendel states that the term Jumma links the CHT people to the emerging activism for the rights of indigenous people, which has been on the rise since the early 1980s. Whether this newly emerging window of opportunity influenced the PCJSS's decision to enter into a peace process with the Government of Bangladesh in the late 1990s is doubtful.<sup>7</sup> However, efforts to institutionalise mechanisms for the protection of indigenous people at the global level have encouraged politically active indigenous people in Bangladesh to take up the language of indigeneity.



### **The Activist Movement and Translocal Connections**

Expectations were high after the Peace Accord was signed by the Government of Bangladesh and the PCJSS in December 1997. It was hoped that the new government would take serious steps towards reconstruction and reconciliation, as well as to meet the demands for recognition of the hill people's rights and self-determination. Initial efforts to implement some of the provisions of the Accord, including the establishment of a regional council, were made, but a lack of political will impeded their success. Similarly, the three Hill District Councils, which were to be strengthened, faced serious problems in their work. The Ministry of CHT Affairs was also established – with an indigenous person as minister – but the last couple of years have shown that the ministry represents the interests of the government vis-à-vis the CHT, rather than the other way around.<sup>8</sup> In addition, not all politically active hill people supported the Peace Accord; the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) took a strong stance and voiced some serious arguments against it. This has led to a violent conflict between the PCJSS and the UPDF.<sup>9</sup>

Initial hopes were dashed when the opposition won the elections in 2001 with a clear stance that was contrary to that of the previous government. Although the Awami League raised new hope during its election campaign in 2008, hardly any of the promises it made have been fulfilled. Today, the CHT are in a state of no war/no peace, with heavy militarisation, an anti-Pahari movement of Bengali settlers who have strong relationships with the military forces, an increasing level of exploitation of natural resources – including land grabbing – and, above all, at least three different, opposing factions among the politically active indigenous people – allegedly with military support on all sides.

Parallel to the struggles and negotiations between political actors in Bangladesh, the international initiative for the rights of indigenous people gained momentum. After the International Year of the World's Indigenous People in 1992, the first International Decade of the World's Indigenous People was proclaimed in 1993, followed by a second Decade which ends in 2015. The Decades were marked by a variety of activities, including institutionalisation through the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and activities in the various local and regional contexts. In 2007, the United Nations Declaration for Indigenous People's Rights was endorsed after a 23-year-long process. It provides a set of "minimum standards for the survival, dignity and



well-being of the indigenous people” (Oldham and Frank 2008: 5). Although not binding, it is an “internationally sanctioned legal instrument that aims to advance the codification of indigenous rights in national constitutions and legal systems” (Shah 2007: 1806) and thus may constitute a precursor to a legally binding convention.

Furthermore, two conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) explicitly address the rights of indigenous people. Convention 107 applies to members of tribal and semi-tribal populations, and Convention 169 to tribal peoples and peoples who are regarded as indigenous (Kingsbury 1995: 20). Convention 107 was ratified by Bangladesh in 1972. In addition, the World Bank and other international development agencies have developed their own policies on indigenous people, which are also relevant in the Bangladeshi context.

One outcome of the UN initiative is the annual celebration of International Day of the World’s Indigenous People on 9 August, which is celebrated globally, nationally and locally. This opportunity to gather and to remind the national public of their existence and their demands has helped indigenous people to organise themselves and to establish networks. In Bangladesh it is significant that, combined with the end of the conflict in the CHT, this has encouraged indigenous activists from all over the country to create networks and organisations that address concerns that are not only specific to a particular region but potentially affect all indigenous populations within the national territory. Only a few of these networks are well institutionalised, one of which is the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum (BIPF). However, some of these initiatives have been subject to a variety of criticisms, and it seems that the entire field is becoming more and more segregated.

Aside from these institutionalised forms, personal networks are very important, as are organisations that are concerned with a broad range of issues (human rights, education, environmentalism, gender and so forth) and also address indigenous issues. Compared with the indigenous activists from the plains, the CHT activists have a relatively long history of professional activism. In addition to militant activism, they have also been involved in political activities (like the formulation of the Jumma nationalism programme) for many years (cf. van Schendel 2001). These activities were incorporated into transnational networks quite early, thanks to well-established relationships with Indian and Filipino activists, but also with organisations from the West, where campaigns against human rights violations started in the 1980s. One example of such alliances is the CHT Commission, which was



formed in 1990s and carried out a number of field investigations on the basis of which it produced reports documenting the human rights violations in the CHT.<sup>10</sup>

Networking activities have also benefited from the formation of transnational spaces as a result of migration. Today, we find communities of migrants from the CHT in the United States, Australia, Korea, Japan, France and elsewhere who have formed networks based on their support for the indigenous population in Bangladesh. Most of them specifically address Jumma issues, but some also deal with the rights of indigenous people in a more general sense. Indigenous activism in the plains, however, has been mainly incorporated into the activities of the communist parties, who continue to speak for the indigenous population as well as landless peasants and other oppressed populations, and who also have a considerable voice within the national political realm. In addition, some of these populations, like the Garo, Santal and Khasi populations, belong to Bangladesh's small Christian community, which has a long tradition of the development and delivery of social services, quite often combined with political activism (cf. Gerharz 2012).<sup>11</sup>

The increasing awareness of the potential of indigenous activism at the global level has also altered the national activist figuration. The various relationships between local and national actors which shape the latter also reach beyond the national space, and can best be described as translocal space, because structuration takes place at and between different societal levels (cf. Gerharz 2012). Translocal space consists not only of activists who consider themselves as indigenous people but also others who seek to support and speak on behalf of the indigenous population (Gerharz 2014b). The global language of indigeneity is a crucial asset for the activist figuration for various reasons.

First, the terminology is a suitable unifier for the extremely diverse conglomerate of groups with different languages, religions and traditions. In order to tie it back to the local context, activists have also embraced the notion of 'Adivasi', which is commonly referred to as a direct translation of the term indigenous people. However, Tripura notes that the Bengali word 'Adibashi' literally means 'original inhabitant', which is synonymous with 'indigenous' but has acquired the connotation of 'primitive'.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Indian activists have increasingly taken up the notion 'Adivasi', which has acquired a positive meaning in contrast to the common denomination 'tribal'. 'Adivasi' has also recently been adopted in Bangladesh, and 'indigenous people',



or 'IP', and 'Adivasi' are used interchangeably to refer to all indigenous populations.

Second, the language of indigeneity serves the aim of relating to the global indigenous community. Social media such as Facebook, but also other virtual platforms, encourage indigenous people from all over the world to communicate their problems and demands, to exchange ideas and to learn from each other. Several Bangladeshi activists participate in these forums in an active way and also receive support in the event of atrocities and human rights violations. Similar relationships also exist beyond the virtual space. Indigenous activists from Bangladesh frequently participate in meetings of the Permanent Forum and other global meetings on indigenous issues. Moreover, they take part in global events on other topics where the position of indigenous populations is considered.

For example, consultations on global climate issues usually allocate some seats to representatives of the global indigenous community in order to make sure that their voices are considered in the negotiation process. Thanks to well-established relationships within the Asian continent, Bangladeshi indigenous activists are regularly invited as one of the Asian indigenous representatives. Last, employing the language of indigeneity provides new opportunities to voice demands for the recognition of minority rights within the national realm. In Bangladesh, a window of opportunity for launching a campaign for constitutional recognition emerged in the late 2000s, when the Awami League regained power over the state.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Language of Global Indigenous Rights**

In 2010, an indigenous caucus was formed within the National Parliament. Equipped with the confidence that the established networks and legitimising power of the language of indigeneity had consolidated the movement's bargaining power not only in the general public sphere but also in the policy-making process, the main aim of the caucus was to work towards the inclusion of the term 'indigenous people' in the Bangladeshi constitution in the course of the ongoing process of amendment. The working group comprised a couple of parliamentarians belonging to both the indigenous and non-indigenous sections of society.



In particular, they lobbied for the inclusion of the term 'indigenous people' in Article 23, which defines the obligation to protect and develop minorities. It was hoped that this would open new vistas to develop affirmative action mechanisms for indigenous people on the basis of overcoming their "historical discrimination".<sup>13</sup> The official adoption of the terminology also helped the activists to lobby for the recognition of the United Nations Declaration for Indigenous People's Rights. This recognition would also mean that the special relationship to land, as it is expressed in indigenous people's collective land rights (as opposed to the individual land rights system among the Bangladesh population) could be officially recognised and protected.

The new initiative benefited from the positive incentives provided by the transnational support network. Several developments conveyed the rising significance of the issues of Bangladesh's indigenous people: Raja Devasish Roy, the chief of the Chakma circle<sup>14</sup> in the CHT and a renowned lawyer, was elected by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples Issues (UNPFII) 2011-2013 in June 2010. In 2009, the UNPFII had appointed Lars-Anders Baer, a member of the Permanent Forum as well as the CHT Commission, as special rapporteur to undertake a study of the implementation status of the CHT Peace Accord,<sup>15</sup> which highlights the attention paid to Bangladesh in the United National system. At the same time, the Government of Bangladesh had sent out positive signals: the Prime Minister and other government officials had repeatedly made use of the terms 'Adivasi' or 'indigenous people' and had publicly shown their support for the indigenous movement. Several politicians had participated in public meetings and given speeches in support of the recognition of indigenous people's rights.

The activists, the media, and the concerned public discussed the potential success of the constitutional amendment intensively. During the gatherings on the World's Indigenous People's Day in August 2010, the amendment was the main demand. In their speeches, the invited government officials showed their solidarity. The political discourse was supplemented with a performative component when a group of musicians sang a 'traditional song' into which they had inserted the sentence "We want constitutional recognition", in English, as a refrain. Overall, most activists and participants were quite optimistic about the potential success.

In March 2011, when the committee that had been formed to coordinate the constitutional amendment announced that the term





'small ethnic minorities' (khudranrigoshti) would be included in the constitution instead, there was considerable indignation and frustration. Despite protests by national activists as well as their international partners, particularly the CHT Commission, the National Parliament endorsed the amendment, with Article 23A of the Constitution reading as follows:

The culture of tribes, small ethnic groups, ethnic sects and communities – The State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes [Upajati], minor races [khudro jati shotta], ethnic sects and communities [nrigoshti o shomprodai].<sup>16</sup>

The denial of constitutional recognition went together with some other governmental initiatives that have been interpreted as being directed against indigenous activism. This became particularly clear in 2011, when the Ministry of Home Affairs released a circular that imposed restrictions on the Indigenous People's Day celebrations. The circular states that:

a) necessary instructions may be sent to the concerned persons so that (on Indigenous Day) government high officials do not give speech/comments that are conflicting/contradictory to the policies of the government undertaken at different times. b) It might be monitored so that no government patronisation/support is provided during the World Indigenous Day. c) Steps might be taken to publicise/broadcast (by providing related information) in the print and electronic media that there are no Indigenous people in Bangladesh. d) The month of August is recognised nationally as the month of Mourning. Hence, such unnecessary amusement programmes in the name of Indigenous Day in this month should be avoided.<sup>17</sup>

This strong opposition against the indigenous peoples' movement is congruent with Bengali nationalism, which has been promoted by the ruling party, the Awami League, since independence. Furthermore, the involvement of transnational allies and the institutional backing of the UN system did not lead to the desired result but provoked governmental resistance.

The juxtaposition of these two dynamics can be seen as underlying the government's decision to refrain from strengthening the position of indigenous people in the constitution. The arguments provided by the proponents of Bengali nationalism have been exploited in opposition to the claim of indigenous people by a couple of political protagonists, one of which is the military, which seeks to maintain its powerful



presence in the CHT. Ostensible cultural homogeneity, as it was promoted during and immediately after independence, has provided the ground for maintaining national unity in Bangladesh. The current Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, who is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the great Awami League leader and the 'Father of the Nation', continues to argue for Bengali nationalism through reference to her father's legacy. Thus, the following sentence was added to Article 6 (2) of the Constitution: "The people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bengalees as a nation and the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis."<sup>18</sup>

The reaffirmation of Bengali nationalism and the subsequent rejection of indigenous demands came as a surprise and provoked some very emotional reactions. Retrospectively, several factors contributing to the government's decision to take this kind of standpoint can be identified. First, the national debate on authenticity and originality was deeply entrenched in the events that took place at the level of transnational activism. The special rapporteur of the UNPFII, Lars-Anders Baer,<sup>19</sup> who is also a member of the international CHT Commission, submitted his "Study on the Status of Implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord of 1997" in May 2011, which was very timely. In this report he takes a critical stance as he highlights the ongoing militarisation in the CHT and highlights severe shortcomings with regards to governance. The UNPFII accepted several of the recommendations to the Government of Bangladesh, such as the full and timely implementation of the Peace Accord of 1997, the prevention of Bangladeshi military personnel involved in human rights violations of indigenous people in the CHT from participating in the UN peacekeeping missions,<sup>20</sup> and the establishment of independent and impartial commissions of enquiry to address human rights violations against indigenous people in the CHT.

The Government of Bangladesh strongly opposed these recommendations. The first secretary of the Bangladesh mission to the UN submitted a statement to the Permanent Forum saying that there were no indigenous people in Bangladesh and that the Peace Accord had nothing to do with indigenous issues. Therefore, the government claimed that the UNPFII, with its mandate to deal with indigenous issues, would not have "any locus standi" in discussing issues relating to the CHT Peace Accord.<sup>21</sup>

After the request to include the notion of indigenous people in the constitution was declined, government representatives repeatedly



stressed that the concept itself could not be applied to the Bangladeshi context. Former Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, stated at the Economic and Social Council that the people living in the CHT were not indigenous in the sense of the definition provided by the United Nations, but had arrived in the region as asylum seekers and economic migrants.<sup>22</sup>

While on the international stage government representatives rushed to deny the existence of indigenous people in Bangladesh, there was once again strong opposition to activist demands at the national level. In public discourses there was a tendency to interpret the notion of indigenous people as an international concept that foreigners sought to transplant into Bangladesh. The attempt to support the national movement at the level of transnational activism by increasing pressure on the Bangladeshi government thus failed. Although the special rapporteur, highly committed to the struggle of indigenous peoples within Bangladesh, tried to seize the window of opportunity provided by the open atmosphere during the discussion about the constitutional amendment, his attempt resulted in a backlash. This episode shows the limited scope for transnational activism and reveals that its potential for success is highly dependent on context. In Bangladesh, granting indigenous rights would imply far-ranging concessions that are crucial to the national interest with regards to the ideal of a culturally homogeneous nation.<sup>23</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this paper I have shown that the categories used for naming a social collective have changed over time. The denominations for those who are called 'indigenous people' by many activists, both in Bangladesh and globally, have depended on the policies and aims of the respective authorities as well as on their developmental agendas. What can be seen today is that various approaches and political agendas exist concurrently. On the one hand, the nation-building project of the Bangladeshi state relates to ideal images of citizenship, which continue to rest upon the utmost homogeneity in cultural terms. On the other hand, globalised discourses and the rising significance of transnational connections have given legitimacy to approaches that seek to define particular populations 'beyond the nation state'. In the case of indigenous people, these attempts are related to contemporary rights-based approaches which rest upon the premises of the universalist claims for human rights as well as social, cultural and economic rights.



The Bangladeshi case, however, shows that the politics of nationalism continue to circumvent the validity of such claims and that the interests of majority populations within the nation-state seem more legitimate to some than the protection of minority interests.

Paradoxically, both dimensions can be interpreted as being directly related to recent globalisation processes. Globalisation, in the sense of deterritorialisation, has opened new avenues for denationalisation and the permeability of boundaries and therefore paves the way for universalist claims. In that sense, the emergence of indigenous activism can indeed be regarded as challenge to the modernisation efforts of nation-states, as Clifford has described. However, rising numbers of incidents of collective violence can also be traced back to the growing pressure from globalising forces, which threatens nationalist ideals of cultural purity within nation-states and leads to the reassertion of we/they constructions in ethnic terms (Appadurai 2006). Minorities thus become a problem because they challenge the national narratives of social cohesion and homogeneity.

In times of intensifying pressure from global and transnational forces on almost all states, a densely populated and comparatively resource-poor nation-state like Bangladesh is particularly challenged to find ways to secure the livelihoods of its citizens and ensure their well-being. Seen from this angle, the stubborn insistence of indigenous activists to recognise the existence of their constituencies as culturally different, yet historically discriminated and marginalised citizens who seek to ensure their equal treatment by means of protection, seems to be particularly hopeless. Despite all critiques concerning the essentialising overtones and potentially racist connotations of the concept of indigenous people, the question remains: what alternative ways do populations which have been regarded as inferior to the majority within the nation-state have to ensure the accomplishment of equality? Neither activists nor academics have yet found a convincing answer to this question.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <http://ptripura2.wordpress.com/2013/12/17/ip-year-1993-keynote-paper/> [retrieved 20.08.14].

<sup>2</sup> This has also been stated in the context of critical perspectives on the relevance of the concept of race in South Asia (Robb 1997: 1).

<sup>3</sup> This process had been initiated by the British colonial administration, who sought to transform the agricultural practices that were considered to be backward and not market-oriented.



<sup>4</sup> 'Adivasi' is used as the Bengali equivalent for 'indigenous people'.

<sup>5</sup> The term 'Upajati' has become a common denominator for the indigenous population in the newly born state of Bangladesh.

<sup>6</sup> 'Jooma' is equivalent to 'Jumma' (shifting cultivator), a term which has gained political relevance.

<sup>7</sup> The decision to end the violent conflict and enter into peaceful negotiations was influenced by a few different factors, including India's unwillingness to sustain the Shanti Bahini anymore.

<sup>8</sup> The ministers have been appointed on the basis of their loyalty to the ruling party.

<sup>9</sup> A few years ago another faction emerged which disagrees with the dominant political party, the PCJSS. There are accounts which testify that all three fractions receive support from the armed forces and there is good reason to assume that this is part of a strategy to weaken the political forces.

<sup>10</sup> The CHT Commission was initiated by the Amsterdam-based Organising Committee CHT Campaign and the International Working Group for Indigenous Peoples in Copenhagen. Following a largely inactive period of about eight years, the commission was reformed in 2008.

<sup>11</sup> However, Christian institutions usually tried to refrain from voicing their demands too loudly in a country with such an overwhelming Muslim population.

<sup>12</sup> <http://ptripura2.wordpress.com/2013/12/17/ip-year-1993-keynote-paper/> [retrieved 29.08.14].

<sup>13</sup> This was the term used by one activist supporting the initiative during my fieldwork in 2010.

<sup>14</sup> In the CHT, there are three administrative circles, each one headed by a traditional chief, or raja.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.iwgia.org/news/search-news?news\\_id=307](http://www.iwgia.org/news/search-news?news_id=307) [retrieved 20.08.14].

<sup>16</sup> [http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/pdf\\_part.php?id=367](http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/pdf_part.php?id=367) [retrieved 29.10.14].

<sup>17</sup> <http://de.scribd.com/doc/102343718/English-Version-Not-to-Celebrate-1p-Day> [retrieved 18.08.14]. The government has declared August a month of mourning because in August 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family were killed in a military coup. His daughter, Sheikh Hasina, the current prime minister of Bangladesh, survived.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. [http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/pdf\\_part.php?id=367](http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/pdf_part.php?id=367) [retrieved 29.10.14].

<sup>19</sup> See the Special rapporteurs' study on the status of implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord of 1997 presented at the UNPFII here: [www.iwgia.org/news/search-news?news\\_id=307](http://www.iwgia.org/news/search-news?news_id=307) [Retrieved 29.10.2014].

<sup>20</sup> The Bangladeshi Army has become one of the main providers of staff for UN peacekeeping missions worldwide.

<sup>21</sup> See press statement of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, 5 June 2011. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8ka4FwgZxAMX1hmdWpGMkRRV3M/edit?pli=1> [retrieved 29.10.14].

<sup>22</sup> Statement by Chakma Raja Devasish Roy, 27 July 2011. <http://www.bdnews24.com> [retrieved 24.08.14].

<sup>23</sup> Another dimension, which can be referred to only briefly here, is economic interests. These interests are directly linked to the demilitarisation of the CHT as demanded in Baers' report. Conversations with experts in Bangladesh reveal that the military depends on the CHT as a "training ground" for soldiers who are to be deployed in UN peacekeeping missions. As these missions constitute an important source of income for the Bangladeshi army, the withdrawal



from the CHT would diminish the soldiers' exposure to practical training, which is a requirement for taking part in the UN missions. The second issue is access to land, which has been one of the core arguments throughout the armed conflict and remains highly topical in densely populated Bangladesh. A recent study by Adnan and Dastidar (2011) reveals that the security forces as well as state institutions continue to be involved in the redistribution of land in the CHT through acquisition and land-grabbing.

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