

## POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT AND ARTICULATION OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY: THE FORMATION OF MUNDA IDENTITY IN BARIND, BANGLADESH

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### ABSTRACT<sup>2</sup>

*This paper is about the identity formation of an ethnic group – the Munda of Bangladesh. The key issue of this paper is how the Munda identity has been constructed by the state and by the development agencies, covering historical as well as current trends. Throughout colonial and postcolonial periods in the academic and policy discourse, the Munda/Adibashi were represented as "primitive," "backward" and "underdeveloped." Here, I argue that the images contribute to the making of the "category" of Adibashi as "primitive," "backward" or "underdeveloped" are actually a perception, not a representation of reality. The representation of Munda identity articulated by the academician or the development practitioner ignores the complexities, dynamism and history of these people.*

**Keywords:** Barind region of Bangladesh, Adibashi, ethnic minorities, identity formation, power relations

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper makes an intention to deal with the identity formation of an Indigenous group (known as Adibashi)—the Munda of Bangladesh. The question of how the Munda identity has been constructed and represented by the state and by the development agencies, covering historical as well as current trends, is the key issue of this paper. This issue needs special preference because its importance lies to understand the mechanism of exclusion and marginalisation of the Munda as well as other Adibashi of Barind, Bangladesh.

Throughout colonial and postcolonial periods, the Indigenous or Adibashi people were represented as "primitive," "backward" and "underdeveloped." Both in the academic and policy discourse, the Munda were singled out as representing these characteristics. Representation of Munda in some specific categories reveals a cultural politics of development which is illustrated here by examining the Adibashi's positioning within wider discussion of colonial and postcolonial intellectuals—about state's intervention and development policy and practices, covering historical as well as current trends. The data used in this paper are from population census, historical documents, reports of development agencies and field observation. This paper is not simply an exploration about how the state or non-government organisations (NGOs) views on Adibashi but is about the power relations among the state, the NGOs and the Adibashi.

This paper is organised as follows: first, it presents the concept of identity, which I draw from contemporary debate of identity politics and development studies. Second, it focuses on the construction of Adibashi identity by reviewing traditional and contemporary academic works on the Adibashi from colonial to postcolonial era; here, I explore the historical and the contemporary processes at work in the formation of Adibashi identity. I then go on to describe the attempts made by the state and development agencies (such as NGOs) to articulate Adibashi Identity and argue that the images contribute to the making of the "category" of Adibashi as "primitive," "backward" or "underdeveloped" is actually a perception, not a representation of reality. To examine the argument, in the final part I discuss Munda everyday life practices in contemporary Barind region and show that the representation of Munda identity articulated by the academician or the development practitioner ignored the complexities, dynamism and history of these Adibashi people.

## **CONCEPT OF IDENTITY**

Identity formation and maintenance are influenced by one's ethnicity, politics, location and environment (Harris et al. 1995). The concept of identity manifests itself not only at the level of the individual but also at the level of societies and interactions between groups.

General discussions on the concept of identity are mostly focused on the politicisation of the Adibashi identity and the political process of group formation based on it. Under this line of argument, in the academic discourse of Bangladesh the Adibashi identity developed from a binary opposition between Bengalis and Adibashi. This opposition was exacerbated by fierce competition for natural and state resources. Some argue that the Adibashi's isolated, marginalised position in relation to the land led to their continued oppression and subservience. Their accounts emphasise the effect that competition for land and alienation from it ultimately had on the Adibashi identity and the Adibashi social and political movements (Ali 1998; Shafie 2003). However, these accounts err in presupposing the existence of a fixed identity of an Adibashi group.

In the context of Indonesia, Tania Li (2000) has argued that a group's self-identification as tribal or indigenous is not natural or inevitable but neither is it simply invented, adopted nor imposed. To her, it is rather positioning that draws on "historically sedimented practices, landscapes and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle" (ibid). She cites Hall's argument that "cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (ibid). Under Hall's view, identities are always about "becoming" and "being," and are never simply invented—and such a view, Li argues, "offers a way out of the impasse in which those who historicise the identities are accused of undermining subaltern political projects founded on ordinary perhaps essential truth" (Li 1996).

It is out of a somewhat similar context that the identities of Munda in Barind, Bangladesh should be explored—through their history of struggles with the colonial and postcolonial states and society, in general. One must look at the changing position of Munda in the present dynamic. The Munda presently face a process of constant struggle, in which they try to overcome the hierarchical dominance of the Muslim majority. Here, I take into account the Munda's larger politico-economic, institutional and technological transformations and how they reposition themselves and exert their agency

throughout changing contexts. Munda act alternately as individuals, cultivators, or tenants who need protection, depending on the situation's demands. This fact creates the need to look at various contexts in contemporary situations, which requires multiple subjectifications.

## **HISTORY OF FORMATION OF "ADIBASHI" AS A CATEGORY**

This section focuses on the representation of Adibashi following academic writings of colonial administrators and post-colonial academicians. Here, I try to locate them in historical and political context in which Adibashi were defined and constituted.

### **Colonial Knowledge: Construction of the notion of "Primitive"**

During the phases of colonisation in Indian subcontinent, the Adibashi were referred as primitive, backward, savage and uncivilised by colonial administrative. The colonial administrators referred them as "tribes" and classified them different from castes. The colonial distinction between castes and tribes was laid by the eighteenth century British officials. William Jones in his theory of Aryan invasion explained the existence of an Aryan and a Dravidian race (Bates 1995). Between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, another British official James Cleveland indicated the difference of hill and forest communities from those in the plains (Briggs 1852). But no single term had as yet emerged for them. Through the 1820s and 1830s, the tribes were attributed adjectives such as "wild," "savage," "predatory," and noun likes "groups," "bands," "tribes," "races" or even "castes" (cf., Skaria 1997). It is by the 1840s that they begin to be described more consistently (though not yet exclusively) as tribes, usually as "aboriginal, forest or hill tribes." It was 1852, when Briggs had provided a list of difference between aborigine and Hindus: Hindus had caste divisions, aborigines did not; Hindus did not eat beef, aborigines did; Hindus' widows did not remarry, aborigines' widows did, and so on (Briggs 1852). And by the 1860s the distinction between castes and tribes had almost entirely crystallised (Skaria 1997). Such ideas are voiced much clearly by "Professor Tagore" an Indian academicians informing the Anthropological Society in 1863 that "the aborigines of India were cannibals..." (cf., Guha 1999).

British census commissioner Risley in his multivolume work "*The Tribes and Caste of Bengal*" (Risley 1891) analysed tribes of Bengal on the

basis of anthropometric data. Risley's scheme of hierarchical classification which divided India into seven racial "types," with dark skinned "Dravidians" defined as the most "primitive," and fair "Indo-Aryans" the most ethnologically "advanced" was primary base in legitimising the British policy of distinguish tribes from the cast. He noted: "The existence of different races of men in Bengal, the Aryan and the aboriginal. The former is represented by the Brahmans, Rajput and Sikhs. These generally have tall forms, light complexion and fine noses, and are in general appearance superior to the middle class of the Europeans. The Kols are a specimen of the latter. They have short stature, dark complexion and snub noses, and approach the African blacks in appearance ... the higher [a man's] origin, the more he resembles the Europeans in appearance" (Risley 1891).

Risley has been much criticised for his scheme by his contemporary scholars (Dirks 1992). William Crook (1896) recognised that racial differences were not so sharp criteria to differentiate between tribe and caste. To him, intermixing was in practice and it created some new castes; he also pointed out that tribal often became caste through the adaptation of caste customs (cf., Skaria 1997). But this recognition did not change the conventional British understanding that the "tribal" were racially and culturally distinct from the Hindus. The British government support Risley's scheme for an ethnography survey of India and it was specifically directed "to collect the physical measurements of selected castes and tribes" (Dirks 1992).

Another criterion used to distinguish between tribe and caste was the hierarchy of modes and subsistence. Hunting was considered the lowest stage in social evolution; it was succeeded by pastoralist and then agriculture and industry was the culmination of development. The groups who were depending on hunting eventually became "tribes" in the view of British officials. Similarly, the groups who lived in the forest or hills were seen as "wild."

Indeed, the association of forests with wildness was so strong that many colonial officials were to recommend that forest be cleared. They wanted to remove these communities from forest as a way of civilising them, or that they be introduced to "humanising tendencies" of settled agriculture (Government of Bombay 1898).

Through the process of imagining differences, a list of "tribes" of India was prepared by the late nineteenth century. Needless to argue, the list was fundamentally arbitrary. It was exemplified that some groups like Kolis were quite like the Bhils, but happened to be classified as castes rather than tribes because they took up settled agriculture during the nineteenth century (Government of Bombay 1901). It was quite common in the sense that the

tribes shared cultural, social and economic practices with their neighbours in the region. Hilary Standing argues in this context that: "In its original usage the term Munda meant a wealthy man or head of a village responsible to the superior landlord for tribute and revenue exaction" (Standing 1973). Only under the British did the term Munda come to mean a particular of person and "a whole tribe defined in ethnic terms" (Ibid). It is in this sense that one can really describe the colonial list of tribes as "a process of primitivization, or of the invention of primitive society" (cf., Skaria 1997).

From the above discussion, it is clear that the categorisation of "tribe" was rooted in colonial construction. The representation of "tribe" once formed in the colonial regime, remain a powerful imagining in late twentieth century academic discourse, which I address in the following part.

### **Post-colonial Knowledge**

The criteria used for defining the tribe in post-colonial period were: isolation, racial characteristics, the use of "tribal" dialects, "animism," "primitive" economic activities, eating habits (non-vegetarian), dress (naked or semi-naked), nomadism, propensity to drink and to dance (Report of the Schedule Castes and Tribes 1952).

These were the common traits considered for making the representation of Adibashi by the scholars of early postcolonial era. As I mentioned, one of such view was the isolation, for Weiner (1978) "it is not a mixed village of tribes and casts..." David Mandelbaum also makes a similar point of this view: "most tribal people in India live in hilly or forested terrain where population is sparse and communication difficult... within their villages and localities... most tribals have a strong sense of their distinctiveness and hold themselves to be quiet separate from jati villages" (Mandelbaum 1970).

Stephen Fuchs presented the following hypothetical reconstruction of the history of the "aboriginal tribes:" "Many of the aboriginal tribes in India were without doubt in ancient times simply food gatherers and primitive hunters. When their hunting and collecting grounds were gradually appropriated by cultivating immigrants coming from distant lands, and in the possession of a superior culture, the food-gathering tribes had to yield to them. Some of the tribes allowed themselves to be subdued and assimilated by the new-comers, others escaped into areas still comparatively free of shelters, and others again retained their nomadic and collecting way of life in defiance of the new situation" (Fuchs 1973).

This description assumes that the present day social divisions of society track primeval line of descent. The hunters-gatherers were thrust into the forest and their descendants are the "tribals" of twentieth-century of India – such as Munda, Oraon, Santal.

Another view grounded on economic underdevelopment and an absence of economic specialisation. For some authors (for example Schermwehorn 1978; Sharma 1978) the Adibashi cultivators are endowed with an economic rationality, but not with the profit-maximising mentality of the commercial farmer. Schermwehorn (1978) stated, "The Adibashi gives little value on surplus accumulation and stress prompt consumption and immediate enjoyment. 'Tribes' were seen as homogeneous units, marked by backwardness."

This views also echoed by Weiner's description about the tribes of Chotanagpur: He stated, "... They live in their own villages, many of which are wholly homogenous... Perhaps the most distinctive feature of tribal life is the very attitude toward life itself. In contrast with their Hindu neighbours, the tribals are a carefree people, hedonistic in their simple pleasure" (Weiner 1978).

Weiner also suggested that, "most of (Chotanagpur's) tribals live as peasants, cultivating grain crops" (Werner 1978). Under the traditional land right system, land is regarded as the common property of the community, to them it is inalienable... people does not owe the land on which they live and work... they merely control it... land belongs to God as the creator... land is the mother earth for them... (Schermwehorn 1978; Mandelbaum 1970; Sharma 1978).

A persistent assumption of the nineteenth century European scholars had been that "tribes" have a shallow conception of history that is they are the people without history. Their history then easily becomes "mythology," a trait that is accompanied by as "overall tradition-orientation" (Dube 1960). To quote Devalle (1992), "Tradition orientation has often been equated with 'backwardness' in the scale of civilisation. On these grounds the Adibashi's sense of history and their culture are declared to be retrograde, a 'negation' of progress, a perpetuation of backwardness. In this way backwardness becomes trait inherent to these societies."

The views of Bangladeshi scholars to represent the Adibashi were not different from the western scholars. We can observe the strong echoes of nineteenth-century European views on the writings of Bangladeshi scholars. Academic discussion (such as Gomes 1990, Khaleque 1995 and Ali 1998) on Adibashi that focuses on "tradition" defines them as a homogenous and backward people. They are portrayed as an innocent tribe of rather inefficient

peasant farmers that maintains distinctive, traditional ways of life. This approach provides some historic details about Adibashi, with a particular focus on their "mythology." Religion and customs are discussed at length. As their cultural beliefs and patterns of social and cultural organisation are influenced by Hinduism, anthropologists in this line of study tend to classify them as acculturated or Hindu-ised Adibashi. In these discussions, the text is typically organised as follows: a brief chapter on the economic arrangement of an Adibashi village followed by detailed chapters on aspects of Adibashi life, such as customs, folklore, dance and music, and tribal religion.<sup>3</sup> The Adibashi society is described as kinship based. Lineages or clans tend to be the chief corporate units and are often the principal units for landownership, defence, economic production and consumption. The Adibashi are organised according to cultural principles that are considerably different from mainstream society. They are characterised as lazy and reluctant to work, and therefore, incapable of accumulating food stores. Moreover, it is alleged that while they can work diligently when necessary, they do not find much pleasure in the sweat of labour. In short, these studies have consciously considered the Adibashi culture and social-economic systems, but they have tended to treat the Adibashi systems as internally uniform and static. These studies have remained synchronic and descriptive because they have ignored the economic and political transformations that the Adibashi have undergone (Devalle 1992).

### **THE CONTESTED CATEGORIES AND EMBEDDED POLITICS: REPRESENTATION OF "ADIBASHI" IN THE POLICY AGENDA**

In the academic and policy discourse and in various other popular understandings, Adibashi are commonly perceived as marginal, socially, economically and physically removed from the mainstream. This understanding of Adibashi have been taken from late colonial ethnography and used to justify a project – that of "uplift," that had also began under colonialism. This section looks primarily at the development policies undertaken in the colonial and post-colonial regimes and highlights their representation of Adibashi. The purpose of this analysis is to focus attention upon the political-economic context in which particular representations are deployed.

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<sup>3</sup> For detail, see Ali (1998) and Gomes (1978).



## Development of the Colonial Period: Divide and Rule

In the early nineteenth century, the British rule made a proposal for a systematic Ethnographical Survey that could provide them a detailed enquiry into the customs of all tribes and castes of Bengal. As a part of this program British administrators Dalton (1872) and Risley (1891) had collected information on the "tribes" and "castes" to divide India into manageable units of "tribe" and "caste" and to identify a group of responsible revenue-farmers with whom British could deal (Sengupta 1982). During this period, says Sengupta, "the policy of divide and rule was a well applied policy of British administrators" (Ibid). One part of the policy was to divide tribe from caste and other was, in the late 1920s, to Reserved Constituencies in tribal areas.

The British policies had brought about fundamental changes in the agrarian system of the tribals of Bengal by introducing the Permanent Settlement Act in 1793. The consequences of this act was alienation of Adibashi from the land and the migration of contract labour—in fact a form of bonded labour—to the tea plantation of Assam, to the coal-mines of Bihar, and to the indigo plantation of Bengal (cf., Devalle 1992). Within the British divide and rule policy the Adibashi were given a subordinate role in the economic system. That is, the Adibashi were considered as a reserve labour force for indigo plantation in Bengal, tea plantation in Assam and mines in Jharkhand. *The Bengalee* (1886) stated in 1886 that Santal Parganas constituted "the mainstay of the labour force" in the Assam tea gardens, supplying 44.7 percent of the workers. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century the Munda and the Santal had also been considered to be "the means of rendering British [indigo] enterprise possible through the whole of Bengal." These peoples were seen as "patient of labour... able to live on a penny a day, contented with roots when better food is not to be had" (Hunter 1868). The British policy challenged and ultimately changed the conception of the Adibashi regarding property ownership, economic exchange and sharing. The consequences were at a more fundamental level that it alienated the "tribes" from their means of production and turned them into a dependent population.

The arrival of Christian mission in India was also a part of British divide and rule policy. The German Evangelical Lutheran mission was first settled in Chotanagpur when it established stations in Munda territory in 1845<sup>4</sup> (Devalle 1992). In this way, a legal and administrative system, a capitalist economy, and the Church were present in Bengal with its "civilising"/educational mission. Education given by the different missions,

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<sup>4</sup> The mission had 40,000 converts by 1895. Santals and Hos rarely converted; the bulk of tribal Christians were Mundas and Oraons.

based on European value, contribute to the "tribal" deculturation. The British had some other missions behind its establishment of Church that was to control violent conflicts of the tribe. However, "tribals" who came into contact with the missions became more aware of the way in which the colonial system worked, and organised themselves to resist it (Thapar and Siddiqui 2003). Converts refused to work for the zaminder without pay, some converts had secured their lands through registration. However, their economic power was insufficient to enable them to evolve into a rich peasant sector. Capital, lands and market control (subordinated to the colonial economy) was in the hand of zaminders (ibid).

This section clearly reveals that the colonial policy meant that the Adibashi had little economic choices, no say in administrative affairs, and decisions were made for, not with, them. The British had little interest in preserving the rights of the Adibashi. Their interest focused on the use and exploitation of the Adibashi labour force.

### **Development in the Post-colonial Era: Policies of Assimilation and "Uplift"**

In the state discourse that has occurred from the British Colonial period to current-day Bangladesh (1971–to date), the north-western Adibashi's cultural distinctiveness and livelihood practices are officially unrecognised. In keeping with this official view, national census data contains no information about the population of the Adibashi, their regional concentration or the relative proportions of migrants and original inhabitants in any particular area. Thus, a sizeable number of Adibashi peoples who claim to be Christians or Hindus are registered as Christian and Hindus. Only those Adibashi claiming to adhere to the indigenous religion (animism) are categorised as the unspecific "other."

The Bangladesh constitution of 1971, which was adopted by the Bangladesh Parliament on 4 November 1972, reflects hegemonic cultural nationalist ideas. As stated in Article 9, "The unity and solidarity of the Bengali nation, which deriving its identity from its language and culture, attained sovereign and independent Bangladesh through a united and determined struggle in the war of Independence, shall be the basis for Bengali nationalism" (Government of Bangladesh 1972). The original Article 6 (part I), amended in 1977, declared that, "all citizens of Bangladesh should be known as Bengalis." The article goes so far as denying the existence of the Adibashi in the country. It thus absolves the state from taking any special measures in favour of the Adibashi and legitimises assimilation policies (Mohsin 2003).

Article 28 contains a clause that indirectly obliges the state to make special provisions for the advancement of any ethnic group including "...women, children and *any backward section of citizens*" (Government of Bangladesh 1972). These unspecific and derogatory terms are illustrative of the official position, and the Adibashi have been portrayed in teaching material made for public primary schools in this way. Such representations of the Adibashi reveal an underlying attitude that denies them full citizenship, relegating them to a marginal existence dependent on the interstices of the nation and the state.

These issues were made abundantly clear in the speech of President Sheikh Mujib during the course of the constitutional debate in the parliament. Mujib said:

"Our ideology is clear. This ideology has inspired us to attain independence, and this ideology shall constitute the basis of this state. Nationalism—Bengali nationalism—shall be the main pillar of this state. Bengali nationalism encompasses Bengal's culture, Bengal's heritage, its land and above all the sacrifices made by the Bengalis" (Parliament debate, 12 October 1972).

President Shekh Mujibur Rahman, ignoring the ethnic heterogeneity of Bangladesh, opted for an assimilationist model of nationhood (Mohsin 2002). "There was no scope for the accommodation of any identity other than Bengali in the state of Bangladesh" (ibid).

There is a sharp discrepancy between NGOs and the state when it comes to the representation of Adibashi. The government represents them as "backward section of citizens," whose ethnic identity and distinctive forms of social organisation are officially unrecognised, whereas NGOs represent the Adibashi as culturally distinct group and as people of "underdeveloped," who need outside development measures. After the Mujib regime (1971–1975), no government undertook any development plans for the Adibashi of Barind. The Bangladesh government also ignored the internationally recognised category of "indigenous and tribal peoples" (as defined at International Labor Organization convention 169) and refused to make an official declaration of tribal territories. The government dismissed national activists and international donors, who argued for the rights of indigenous people. The only assistance the Adibashi received from the government was reserved seats as "backward citizens" at the university level. The law was implemented during the mid 1980s. Under this law, five percent of seats are reserved for the Adibashi in every public university of Bangladesh.

Nevertheless, from the early 1990s onwards (and increasingly in the late 1990s), a discourse on Adibashi (that is, work to uplift "under-develop and poor") began in NGO and national activist circles. This discourse is still increasing in rural Bangladesh.

### **The Image of Adibashi in Agenda of NGO: Politics of NGOs and the Munda**

NGOs emerged in Bangladesh during and after the Liberation War in 1971. In the early period, they were engaged in relief and rehabilitation activities. Since the late 1970s, some have initiated new participatory development strategies focused on the rural poor, with the aim of alleviating poverty (Westergaard 2000). Most of the NGOs in the country are best known for their micro-credit projects.

In the Barind region, some local and national NGOs such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Grameen Bank, Association for Social Advancement (ASA), Karitas, Ashrai and Barind Development Organization (BDO) are working for the Adibashi development. These NGOs operate to improve social and economic conditions for the Adibashi people. At least four different NGOs, including Ashrai, BDO, Karitas and BRAC, worked in the villages of Khaspara and Mahapara in Niamatpur where I conducted my doctoral research. With the exception of BDO, the other three NGOs (Ashrai, Karitas and BRAC) were large, well-known national organisations, each with more than a decade's worth of experience in working in villages. NGO micro-credit is widely spread throughout the villages. Other than offering micro-credits, these NGOs launched special programs exclusively for the Adibashi, namely childhood educational programs, adult group educational programs and awareness programs. These development strategies were integral to policing efforts to develop Adibashi from "under development."

The image of the Adibashi in development discourse is that of a "primitive," "backward" and "uncivilised" individual in need of development. The categorisation of Adibashi was rooted in colonial construction. British colonial writers described them as "primitive" and "savage" in which the emphasised had been on assimilating the Adibashi and ensuring that they become more developed (see Padel 2000). This representation of "Adibashi" once formed in the colonial regime, continued to be encountered frequently in late twentieth century academic discourse. The NGOs adopted these stereotypes in terms of development policies. They emphasised that it is their

responsibility to "uplift" them through empowerment and educational programs that attempts to narrow the distance between Adibashi and the "normal" or "civilised" citizens of Bangladesh.

The images contribute to the making of the "category" of Adibashi, is actually a perception, not a representation of reality. These images ignore the social realities of Adibashi people who are understanding, aspiring and willing to work toward bettering their lives. All of the images, in the form of discourse, justify intervention on behalf of the Adibashi people, as they are desperately in need of credit or education to escape the oppression and exploitation of the majority of the community. NGOs follow these discourses because their very existence depends on such categorisations.

The academic discourses dominated by the views on Adibashi are "backward" and "underdeveloped" and ignore the complexities, dynamism and history of the Adibashi. However, these views have shaped the practices of Adibashi development programs. Generally, their development projects provide a discursive framework premised on the idea that only outside forces, such as well-organised NGOs, can help them overcome new difficulties and adapt to change. According to development agencies, this can only be accomplished through empowerment and educational programs that attempt to narrow the distance between Adibashi and the "normal" or "civilised" citizens of Bangladesh.

## **THE CONSTRUCTION OF MUNDA IDENTITY**

The northwest prefecture of Bangladesh, popularly known as Barind region is a homeland of eighteen different Adibashi group (for example, Santal, Munda, Oraon, Pahari, etc.) mostly belonging to the Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and Indo-European linguistic families.

The Munda are distributed over the Rajshahi, Naogaon, Jaipurhat, Dinajpur and Bogra district of Barind, Bangladesh. Strictly speaking, there is no history of the Munda or other Adibashi groups generally before 18th century. They were regarded as comparatively late immigrant of this region (Bangladesh District Gazetteers 1977). The Munda trace their origin to Azamgarh – a place located in Chotanagpur, Ranchi, eastern Uttar Pradesh of India (Roy 1921). A large number of them had entered in northwestern region after having been domiciled for a generation or more in Malda (India) and Dinajpur (India). Most of them had been brought with Santal and Oraon by the landowners from the adjoining district of Dinajpur and some have

come from their origin home in the Chotanagpur in India. The reason for their immigration was to clear and reclaim jungle land or to keep down the depredations of wild animals. According to the 1931 Census, there were 7,410 Santal, 5,984 Oraon and 962 Munda. The importance of their immigration into the regions was voiced by G. A. Grienson, Census Superintendent of 1901: "About 50 years ago it occurred to the manager of a government state that the waste land might be reclaimed if Santhals were imported and settled there. The experiment was made and proved such a success that the influx has continued ever since... There lead has been followed by... Mundas... from Ranchi" (Grienson 1901 cf. Bangladesh District Gazetteers 1977).

A demographic comparison of Munda and Bengalis may help us to understand their relative positioning, and the nature of interactions between them. According to the 1991 Population Census, the total population of these five districts is around 9.53 million, of which the Munda make up only 0.26 percent, having a population of 25,230; the total indigenous population is 2.51 percent, while the Bengalis, both Muslim and Hindu, are the overwhelming majority, constituting 97.49 percent of the total population.

In reality, the Adibashi groups have never been isolated from the wider society; they resided side by side with majority Bengalis. The Munda are not outside of Bengali society; rather they are a group that exists within the Bengali society. Thus, they are quite similar to "ordinary villagers" not in need of drastic change or improvement (framed as development). Yet they are unlike "ordinary villagers" in their uniqueness, their special knowledge and their attachment to their place.

In the Barind region in Bangladesh during the late 1980s and early 1990s, there has been a widespread introduction of tube wells for irrigation. This enabled an intensification of agriculture that included triple cropping, which resulted in commercialisation of rice agriculture and higher demand for agricultural labourers. There are now more job opportunities for Munda outside of their own villages in agricultural and other sectors. This has made room for negotiation regarding labour conditions between the Munda and Muslim landowners in villages. In addition, there are several developmental schemes by the government and NGOs of which Munda demand a share of the benefits, and the Munda's increased participation in electoral politics has enabled them to gain certain negotiating powers as they developed connections with government offices and political parties.

Though all of these scopes are still limited, Munda are becoming aware of their new opportunities and have started expanding their socio-economic-political networks beyond the existing politico-economic

structures of their villages, where majority Bengali cultivators control land and politics and Munda labourers are more or less dependent on the patronage of landowners. On the economic front, Munda started negotiating and bargaining with landowners regarding labour wages. On the political front, they have begun to raise their voices to criticise the existing political powers and demand their "rightful" shares. These acts of resistance and demands by Munda seem to indicate the beginning of the end of the traditional form of domination centred on a Muslim/Munda ethnic hierarchy, underpinned by a landholding structure. Along with politico-economic attempts towards empowerment, Munda's endeavour to reformulate social relationships and cultural values to adjust their position vis-à-vis the network of the larger society in which they live.

The most noticeable change we observed after the introduction of triple-cropping was the opening of space for negotiation and bargaining regarding economic exchange relations between Muslim landowners and Munda tenants and wage labourers. The Munda are no longer obliged to do *begār khātā* (free labour) in *ādhi* (sharecropping) system and have started to demand "due" shares per their agreements with Muslim landowners. Increasing opportunities in agricultural work have allowed Munda to get wages on time; the Muslim landowners are now obliged to pay on time due to high demand in peak agricultural seasons. Thus, under present socio-economic conditions, Munda attempt to redefine the terms of exchange relationships with Muslims in ways that suit their newly emerging sentiments of self-esteem and dignity. They try to avoid any kind of treatment that they find degrading and improper. Notably, the advent of market economies does not mean that the Munda have abandoned their agricultural villages as free economic actors. They prefer to stay in their villages and expand their agricultural and non-agricultural activities locally to achieve economic improvement.

In the present socio-political situation, it is no longer possible for the powerful Muslims and faction leaders to capture the external resources flowing into the village for use in pursuit of their own interests or to establish patronage networks and dominance over Munda for personal gain. Political spheres that were dominated by Muslim landowners and faction leaders through their control of land and tenancy relationships are declining day by day.

The democratisation that began in 1991 after the long year of military rule provided universal suffrage. However, this benefited only a fraction of "elites" among the Munda, while most of them remained marginal to the political process and were exploited as a mere "vote bank"

by the powerful Muslim leaders. The significant change in local politics occurred in 2007, when the interim government attempted to provide a legal framework and institutional support for poor and minority populations to access state resources. These institutional and legal frameworks increased opportunities for Munda to demand their "due" rights or "fair" shares in government property, such as *khāsa pukur* (government-owned ponds) in their villages. *Khāsa pukurs* were formerly captured and controlled only by the Muslims. After the reformation, Munda openly confronted powerful Muslim men and began negotiations to establish their rights using government regulations.

The Munda are now accessing government distribution resources. They are expanding their relations beyond the village to political leaders, political parties, government and NGO officials. Their expanding network and access to state resources have made them aware of the prescribed norms and realities of political process. They now openly complain about the corruption, embezzlement and bribery involved in development programs and distribution of state resources; for example, they complain when they do not receive fertiliser as per requirement or scholarships to which they are formally entitled. Munda concerns and their rising consciousness of "due" or "equal" shares have led them to start demanding their rightful shares from the government. Perhaps most noticeably, a new public image of a desirable socio-political community is emerging through these criticisms that apply the language of "fairness."

NGOs are dedicated to improving the standard of living of the "minority peoples" they work with and integrating them into the mainstream economic development in Bangladesh. Within these common practices NGOs of Barind are offering educational program for children, micro credit and awareness building program for elderly people. I found that there is a growing awareness among the Munda and the other Adibashi to consciously educate themselves to take new steps to improve their own conditions. They do not want to blindly follow instructions from NGOs, which simply direct them to "develop" from "underdeveloped" by income generation scheme, school education and so on. The ordinary Munda assess development as "gaining knowledge," as moulding themselves in new ways to improve their conditions. They have begun to exercise their own agency and this type of agency is not limited to or constituted through NGOs. It is rather constituted through the NGOs and their interaction to wider society.

After a study of Munda's everyday practices, this paper emphasised that the Munda in no sense are "primitive," "backward" or "underdeveloped." They do not fit into these categories defined for them in



some policy agenda. The images imposed upon Adibashi through policy process thus, denied the social reality—their uniqueness, their history and complex way of life.

We must look to changes in technological and institutional contexts as well as the agency of Adibashi people to expand, reformulate and redefine the socio-economic-political relationships in which they are placed. The Adibashi creatively responded to the changing environment filled with new pressures and opportunities.

## **CONCLUSION**

The central question of this paper—how the Adibashi and the Munda identities are formulated—has been investigated in combination with description of historical processes, and socio-political and economic features. A comparative view on identity study suggested that we should not rely solely on those traditional social structures to determine Adibashi identity. Instead social, economic, political and ecological and social influences such as changing demographic patterns, political engagement and technological advancement need to be taken into consideration to provide a more refined understanding of Adibashi as well as Munda identity. After a study on Munda everyday practices, we observed that they adopt multiple positions, identities and strategies to further their interests and dignity as the situation demands. They act as profit-maximisers in market economies, as asserters of human rights in democratic politics, or as "the Munda" or "the Adibashi" in identity politics. They also often draw upon kinship, friendship, patron-client relationships and various types of community fellowships if the situation is apt. There is neither an aggregation of unbound "individuals" who seek to maximise profit and power or the persistence of a "community" structure with set moral norms here. Instead, the Munda people work as agents to improve their overall politico-economic and socio-cultural positions in their interrelationships within the changing environment by utilising all available resources, whether from the market, civil society, kinship or the community. The Munda positions, identities and strategies can adapt to the different contexts and issues.

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