

### Beyond and beneath the nation-state: Bangladeshi indigenous people's activism at the crossroads

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**Beyond and Beneath the Nation-State: Bangladeshi Indigenous  
People's Activism at the Crossroads**

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## **Beyond and Beneath the Nation-State: Bangladeshi Indigenous People's Activism at the Crossroads**

*Eva Gerharz*

On 9 August 2008 a friend took me to the parade held on World Indigenous People's Day in Dhaka. When we arrived at the *Shaheed Menar* (Monument for the Language Movement of 1952), the entire square was crowded with members of Bangladesh's indigenous communities. Several women and men wore their ethnic costume, including the headdress; many of them held posters and signboards carrying political messages. Several honorary indigenous and Bengali civil society members, Bengali and indigenous, were seated on the stage, watching the performances and giving speeches before the procession started along the main road of the Dhaka University campus. It was a peaceful gathering, which led us to the hall in the Engineers Institute, where a film about indigenous people in Bangladesh was screened. Later on, speeches elaborating on the claims of indigenous people in Bangladesh were given by honorary persons from civil society and a government representative.

This strong and visible performance of indigenous activism in Bangladesh's capital amazed me. When I visited Bangladesh in 1999 to do research on the peace process in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), it was hard to find any hints of the existence of ethnic minorities in Dhaka. Along with a lack of visibility and representation, even on occasions such as the World Indigenous People's Day, the term "indigenous" was rarely heard in Bangladesh. The usual term used for the members of the ethnic and linguistic groups living in the small land-strip on Bangladesh's south-eastern border was "tribal". In Dhaka, but also in the Chittagong Hill Tracts themselves, very few other notions for ethnic ascription existed. I remember one person who advised me that the term "ethnic minority" was more appropriate nowadays. Some intellectuals adopted the term "pahari" or "hill people" as a more politically correct notion than the colonial "tribal". For collective representation in international contexts, the term "Jumma" was promoted. For indigenous people living in the plains, the term "adivasi", originating in the Indian context<sup>1</sup> is now regarded as an appropriate, politically correct label.

What we are witnessing in Bangladesh today as compared with ten years ago is a significant increase in networking locally, across national boundaries and also globally. We can observe that the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh have adopted globalised discursive figures such as the label "indigenous", as well as the manifold discourses centred on indigenous rights. They are

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<sup>1</sup> Ghosh (2006: 505) argues that the term "adivasi", the most commonly used designation for tribal populations in India today, was invented by Jharkand' indigenous leaders in the 1930s.

using them strategically for self-representation, and to advocate for their rights and against oppression, discrimination and marginalisation within the nation-state. At the same time, it has become clear that local references to globalised notions and modes of argumentation need to be seen as reciprocal, with increased global attention being paid to the concerns of indigenous people worldwide, in South Asia and in Bangladesh. This is related to a rising awareness of human rights violations and structural inequalities based on ethnic belonging that may perpetuate developmental deficits and create obstacles to the emergence of more just and equal societies.

Observing that activism transcends borders and is increasingly becoming a global issue led by coalitions and networks that constitute a “global civil society” is, of course, nothing new. There is a comprehensive body of literature available, obtained by means of in-depth empirical observations, that demonstrates the rise of transnational activism. However, the transnational perspective entails significant shortcomings because it is based on the primacy of the nation-state and relates the geographic and symbolic dimensions of space in a rather simplistic manner. Hence, I explore the scope for adopting an approach that highlights processes of translocalisation to get a more thorough understanding of Bangladeshi indigenous activism. This implies a number of changes in representation and strategic action, interaction, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion beyond and beneath the national space. I wish to present some preliminary findings geared towards assumptions that allow me to dig somewhat deeper in order to find out the different ways in which the translocalisation of indigenous activism produces social change. Therefore, I will briefly discuss the current state of affairs, highlighting critical perspectives on conventional approaches to transnational activism and advance an argument for developing an approach based on the analytical concept of translocality. I will then discuss the context of the study, starting with some preliminary remarks on the global rise of indigenous discourse, which is strongly related to “place-making” in the United Nations (Muehlebach 2001). I will then summarise the impact of the global indigeneity-discourse on South Asian discourses on indigenesness in order to move towards the local context. To frame the case study, I will analyse the interrelations between different indigenous groups in Bangladesh and show how the local arena has changed in recent years. This relates not only to strategic adaptations of notions and terms such as indigenesness, but to more fundamental changes, such as the emergence of leadership (personalities), new organisations, coalition-formation, and the potential rise of new disparities, cleavages and conflicts. Projecting some preliminary findings resulting from recent field visits, I will finally provide some ideas for future research.

## 1. Debating Transnational Activism

The creation of networks across borders and on a global scale can enhance the bargaining position of marginalised groups within the framework of the nation-state. This has been demonstrated in the growing body of literature dealing with transnational activism that has emerged over the last ten years (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Tarrow 2005; and others). This body of literature has drawn attention to a very important phenomenon characterising globalisation and has therefore made a notable contribution to understanding shifts in the societal order, particularly with regard to their implications for global governance. Most writings on transnational activism are grounded in empirical research and display the effects of a deterritorialisation of activism, for example of the movement of activists within transnational space. Activists' networks are transcending the local to the global; a "scale shift" is taking place. The main argument in this body of literature relates to the so-called "boomerang pattern" (Keck/Sikkink 1998: 13) which manifests itself when local activist movements go global as a consequence of repressive state behaviour and the blocking of channels for advocacy and communication. This model predicts that groups will articulate their grievances in the global sphere (with the help of international allies) to pressure the state for change. However, a number of authors have shown that representations of those activists who have reached "the global" are not always homogeneous and are not always in line with local expectations and perspectives. The field of activism is much more dispersed, scattered and fragmented than can be shown by most literature on transnational activism, with its strong bias towards structural relations constituting transnational space. I will briefly discuss three perspectives addressing these shortcomings.

An important critique is given by Julie Stewart (2004) in an article about the Guatemalan indigenous rights movement. She contends that the "boomerang model", as it has been suggested by Keck and Sikkink (1995), provides only a limited capacity to explain when movements remain local and when they become global. The representation and claims of state repression are not sufficient to explain why movements go global. Second, Stewart stresses that the focus on state blockages glosses over other influences deriving from the global as well as the local sphere. As a consequence of globalisation, the state is nested into a complex global actor configuration which determines a multiplicity of actors and their multi-faceted interests and rationalities. Third, she argues that the boomerang model does not leave much space for activist

agency and it fails “to capture how people interpret their situations, define grievances, mobilize communities, and form strategic alliances and goals” (2004: 261).

Relating to current research on transnational activism in a broader sense, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (2007) takes a similar tack. Based on investigations into the paradoxes of transnational movements against dams in South Asia, she seeks to look beyond the shortcomings of the structuralist assumptions she identifies. First, she challenges the idea that political gains are continuous and reliable by arguing that states may make endless tactical concessions.<sup>2</sup> It is thus an empirical question whether a movement can make lasting achievements. The second critique relates to the effectiveness of civil society organisations, which is often taken for granted without taking other explanatory factors into account. This argument calls for a thorough and far-reaching contextualisation of activists’ achievements, instead of an immediate acceptance of mono-causal explanations. Third, Pfaff-Czarnecka indicates that movements operate simultaneously at different levels and are characterised by contradictions and complex entanglements. Movements, thus, do not just ascend to the global level stage by stage, but tend to operate at very diverse levels and in different directions, not at all uniformly. At the same time, their interests, and also their composition, are conflict prone and marked by heterogeneity and diversity.

Finally, I refer to Kaushik Ghosh (2006), who investigated the transnationalisation of an indigenous movement fighting dam-construction in Jharkand. He explicitly challenges the dichotomy of the coercive nation-state and a liberating transnationalism, which constitutes an explanans of approaches to transnational activism. Therefore, he suggests a focus on the potentially undermining effects of transnational discourses on indigeneity, as the applied categorisations may actually have a marginalising effect on the majority of indigenous populations in India (2006: 503). In particular, he contrasts two different (ideal) types of activist, one cosmopolitan and one local, and shows how indigeneity is represented by employing different discourses that have been shaped by colonial essentialisms. He also highlights the fact that the life-worldly experiences of cosmopolitan activists are sometimes located far away from local perspectives, which may create cleavages and conflicts.

These important critiques point at shortcomings with regard to the agency of the activists but also the agency of those whom activists seek to represent. Moreover, they show that there may be divergent interests, cleavages, and conflicts between different groups, but also within groups. This also implies a need to question the logic entailed in transnationalism in general,

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<sup>2</sup> With her concept of the “cunning state”, Randeria (2003) points at a similar phenomenon.

for example that the emphasis lies on transcending the boundaries of the nation-state instead of taking into account the multiple dimensions and scales that organise sociality in the globalised world. It is not just de-territorialisation and border-crossing that determine and shape the lives of human beings today, but many different forms of de-localisation and re-localisation which need not be territorial in nature.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I wish to work towards a framework that will enable me to investigate the emergence of networking among Bangladeshi indigenous activists situated differently in translocal space. Looking beyond structural relations, I wish to highlight the activists' engagements in various arenas, such as global and regional institutional set-ups, the nation-state and local dynamics. It is thus important to focus not just on the global-local dimension or on those phenomena that transcend boundaries. Rather, I wish to point out that indigenous activism takes place at interfaces in translocal space. The translocal space is made up of a highly complex system of scales and frames of reference.<sup>4</sup> This kind of viewpoint presupposes that we focus less on the structures that emerge as a result of networking, but on highlighting individual and collective agency. By investigating concrete interactions between knowledgeably acting actors, we will be able to unravel activists' various interests, their strategies and responses, power differentials, modes of coalition-formation and conflicts over issues both within the realm of activism and at its boundaries. The findings displayed in this paper are part of a larger ongoing research project on the translocalisation of Bangladeshi indigenous people's activism. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 1999 and 2009. In 1999, a student research project represented my first "real" field research experience in a South Asian country. During this three-month stay, I spent several weeks in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and investigated ethnic identity formation following the Peace Accord of 2002 (Gerharz 2000). Eight months later I returned as a member of an appraisal mission organised by German Technical Cooperation (GTZ). With a team of consultants, I visited various parts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and collected a variety of data based on interviews, observations and (group) discussions. These were supplemented with ethnographic research within the context of my "private" everyday life. After four months of field work I analysed the data to write my diploma-thesis on "Ambivalences of Development Cooperation in Post-Conflict Regions" (Gerharz 2007). During the following eight years of absence, I maintained close ties with Bangladesh as a member of the German Bangladesh-Forum, a network in which German NGOs, church-based organisations, human rights organisations, groups of Bangladeshis living in Germany and individual members lobby for Bangla-

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<sup>3</sup> See Appadurai (2001) for a comprehensive statement on locality.

<sup>4</sup> Lachenmann (2008), Gerharz (2009), Salzbrunn (2008), etc..

desh.<sup>5</sup> We work in close cooperation with our counterparts, mostly members of so-called civil society, including NGO representatives, activists, academics and journalists in Bangladesh. During our biannual conference held in Berlin we enable German politicians and German citizens to learn about Bangladesh, but also engage in intense discussions with typically between eight and ten Bangladeshi guests. When Bangladeshi activists visit Germany, we organise lobbying tours to German ministries, political foundations, thinktanks and European policy makers. In July 2008 I returned to Bangladesh as the supervisor of a student group that conducted research under the framework of “Development, Democratisation and Belonging”. This stay enabled me to re-establish local contacts and networks which I could then explore in more detail during a research visit supported by the EURASIA-Network in spring 2009. Over two weeks I conducted interviews with a number of indigenous and Bengali activists, researchers and NGO representatives and visited three field sites in the northern districts of Mymensingh and Rajshahi. Several shorter visits to Bangladesh have helped to substantiate my arguments; however, this is still work in progress.

## **2. Indigeneity becomes Global...**

With the establishment of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) at the United Nations (UN) in 1982, indigenous people became the first grassroots movement to gain direct access to the major global governance institution (Karlsson 2003: 403). This successful move was based on a global indigenous people’s movement that attempted to lobby to secure their rights through the mechanism of UN because they felt that indigenous rights were strongly neglected in many of the national laws and policy frameworks. But the working group was only the start of much more comprehensive global action on behalf of indigenous people. 1993 was declared as the International Year of Indigenous People. Subsequently, the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights decided to call the first “International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People” (1994-2004), which was followed up by a still-ongoing second decade in 2005. The major objectives of the first decade were to adopt the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples prepared by the working group, to establish a permanent forum for indigenous peoples in the UN system, to develop international standards and national legislation for the protection and promotion of the rights of indigenous peoples and to further the implementation of the recommendations pertaining to indigenous peoples in all high-level conferences (ICIMOD 2007: 3). Seen from a bird’s-eye view, the first decade

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bangladesh-forum.de/> (accessed 09.07.2013).



was a success. In 2000, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) was created as the first formal space for indigenous people to interact within the UN; it is located in New York as a subsidiary body to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Every year, indigenous representatives have the opportunity to address the sixteen permanent experts and, through them, the world (ICIMOD 2007: 8). Furthermore, the decade brought about a Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which had been worked out by the WGIP. Despite some delays, it was finally adopted in 2007 (Oldham and Frank 2008: 5). In addition, a special rapporteur was appointed in 2001, a voluntary fund was set up and an indigenous fellowship programme was established. The decade also generated the International Day of the World's Indigenous People, to be celebrated on 9 August, which is, as shown above, also popular in Bangladesh.

This global institutional set-up provides a forceful mechanism for representing the interests and claims of indigenous people. It is the result of a well-documented historical process. Since the 1980s, indigenous people have received growing scholarly attention, from social anthropologists in particular, but also from sociologists, political scientists and law specialists. Muehlebach (2001) summarises the history of the movement and the rise of formalised representation at the United Nations and shows that the movement had already started in the 1950s with the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. The purpose of this organisation was to link national and international alliances under a global roof. This instigated a complex process of struggles over meaning and the creation of a globalised discourse. But what is striking is the remarkable unity of the arguments made by indigenous leaders and activists in a variety of global fora such as the WGIP (Muehlebach 2001: 421).

The argumentation generally adopted by indigenous people to justify their special status within the global institutional set-up is based on an assumption of a history of oppression expressed in their status as non-dominant sections of society within a nation-state. Muehlebach emphasises that two further elements make up the indigenous strategy of self-representation:

- a. politics of place, e.g. their historical relationship to a territory. Closely intertwined with territoriality is the reproduction of indigenous identity in accordance with specific cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems that are distinct from the national mainstream.
- b. political aim of self-determination, which has so far been denied by most nation-states on territory in which indigenous people live.

This global framework for the representation of indigenous claims is directly related to various post-colonial South Asian countries in the sense that the normative basis of such a claim

directly opposes the ideals of the modern nation-state, which are based on democratic liberalism. Demands for special rights challenge the ideal of citizenship, and anchoring those within the global realm may be against the claims of national sovereignty of many postcolonial states. Bleie (2005: 60) points out that India, for example, maintains that there are no indigenous people in the country, only “scheduled tribes”. Bangladesh has followed India’s position, rejecting international norms and obligations to strengthen indigenous people’s human rights as these are formulated in the respective treaties. While some government officials and human rights organisations who position themselves close to the mainstream political parties argue for the term “ethnic minorities” instead of “indigenous people”, others deny the existence of minorities altogether.<sup>6</sup> This position is based on the argumentation that acknowledging the existence of indigenous people in Bangladesh would suggest that the Bengalis are non-indigenous. This, in turn, would challenge the fundamentals of Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism, which has been at the core of the nation-building project since before the liberation war in 1971. But we need to bear in mind that the marginalisation of indigenous people by nation-states remains a problem that affects not only the safeguarding of democracy and equality, but also the improvement of living conditions and access to development.

Despite Bangladesh’s linguistic and religious homogeneity, it harbours an extraordinarily diverse conglomerate of ethnic groups. There are approximately 45 different ethnic groups in Bangladesh. Some of these have recently adopted global representations of indigeneity in line with intensified networking for activism and lobbying of the state as well as of international donors and advocacy organisations. The next section will discuss how the rise of globalised networks and discourses on indigeneity has shaped the indigenous people’s movement in Bangladesh and ask how it has paved the way for indigenous voices and changed the bargaining position of activists in Bangladesh.

### **3. Indigeneity becomes Local**

During the early years of globalised indigenous people’s representation through the Working Group and non-governmental organisations, only the indigenous activists from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) had access to the global realm. Even though the voices of the CHT people, who had been engaged in and affected by armed conflict since the mid-1970s and, as a result, subject to human rights violations, evictions and displacement, were at times heard by global

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<sup>6</sup> The First Secretary of the Bangladesh Embassy in Germany announced in a speech on April 2008 that there are no minorities in Bangladesh.

bodies and human rights organisations, their engagement did not have much impact within the country. Only since the Peace Accord in the late 1990s have crucial changes taken place regarding the representation of the CHT people, but also of other indigenous groups in Bangladesh. In the following section, I intend to show first why the CHT people have gained more global recognition than other indigenous groups, particularly those in the plains. Then I will argue that the period after the Peace Accord of 1997 reinforced cooperation and networking among the different groups. At the same time, the global recognition of the CHT spearheads the national movement and opens up new opportunities to demand the strengthening of indigenous people's rights with the help of globalised institutions and discourses.

The fact that the hill people from the Chittagong Hill Tracts have received considerable attention within Bangladesh, but also worldwide, can be traced back to a number of factors. First, the armed conflict between the Bangladesh Armed Forces and the Shanti Bahini, fighting for the autonomy of the CHT (1975-1997), was widely recognised. The insurgency was regarded as a threat to national integrity, and the government of Bangladesh responded with massive militarisation and counter-insurgency measures. Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International (1986), *Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker* (the Society for Endangered Peoples) (Mey and (ed.) 1988) and the International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)<sup>7</sup> directed public attention to the CHT. The movement of refugees to the neighbouring Indian states Mizoram and Tripura also provoked international criticism. When the conflict was pacified with a Peace Accord in 1997, political and social scientists published internationally recognised works on the conflict and the peace process (see Mohsin 2003). Economic, political and developmental stakeholders became interested in the CHT. Several bi- and multilateral organisations carried out missions and implemented developmental as well as peace-building activities. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, which between 1990 and 2000 had produced the well-recognised series of reports "Life is not Ours", was reactivated in 2008 and serves as a main organ reporting on the situation in the CHT. The CHT Commission is made up of a number of well-known and respected figures from inside as well as outside Bangladesh.

Second, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which are inhabited by at least ten linguistically and culturally distinct groups, have been represented by a number of highly educated local people. Members of the Chakma appeared in the wider public as eloquent and well-connected representatives. In particular the royal family and the present chief Raja Devasish Roy have put much effort into promoting the interests of the CHT people both nationally and international-

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.iwgia.org/sw617.asp> (accessed 13 July 2013).

ly. The political activities that accompanied the insurgency movement also directly targeted the international arena. Throughout the struggle, political activists from the CHT established networks and created linkages with the global indigenous movement. In the course of this, the self-denomination of “Jumma” (literally meaning swidden cultivators) was invented as a collective term for all indigenous groups living in the CHT (van Schendel 1992).

Third, since colonial times the high concentration of ethnic groups in the CHT and its vast linguistic and cultural diversity, which make the region one of the world’s hotspots of diversity, has attracted the attention and fascination of social and cultural anthropologists. As early as the late nineteenth century, the colonial administrator TH Lewin (1884) expressed his fascination for the “Wild Races of the Eastern Frontier of India”. Among many others, Claude Levi-Strauss (1952) investigated kinship systems among the groups living in the CHT. From the 1950s and 1960s onwards, a number of anthropologists conducted intense field research in the CHT and documented their findings in some well-recognised publications (Löffler 1968; van Schendel 1992; Mey 1980; Kaufmann 1962; Bertocci 1989; Bernot 1964). Today, almost every social anthropologist has heard of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a classical area of anthropological investigation. The fascination for the CHT has also been expressed in a number of illustrated books, displaying the rich customs and traditions of the hill people living in the CHT (Brauns and Löffler 1996; van Schendel, Mey, and Dewan 2000).

The Plainland Adivasi, in contrast, who live scattered over a number of districts in the northern parts of Bangladesh, lacked this kind of strong representation until recently. This is related to a number of circumstances based on misrepresentation and classification. Large parts of the Adivasi groups are integrated into local Christian churches, which, being funded by their western counterparts, have access to education and health facilities. Their “indigenoussness” has been glossed over by their religious membership (Bleie 2005: 13). According to a local expert, the majority of Plainland Adivasi (except the Garo) have less access to education and therefore have a lower capacity for networking. Ellen Bal’s work (2007) represents a unique account of ethnic boundary-making among the Garo, or Mandi, who live mainly in the north-eastern parts of Bangladesh. Compared to groups such as Santal, Oraons, and others living in the north-western and south-western parts of Bangladesh, the Garo have received more attention in the country, not the least because a large portion of the South Asian Garo population lives in the Indian state of Meghalaya, and much has been written about them. The Garo in Bangladesh, on the other hand, have rarely been studied (Bal 2007: 10). Nonetheless, the Garo are among the most visible minorities in Dhaka. Thanks to missionary schools their educational standard is relatively high, which qualifies some Garo for white-collar jobs. Additional-

ly, a visible number of Garo women have migrated to Dhaka and other urban centres to work in beauty parlours. Regarding political representation, Plainland Adivasi activism in general was largely controlled by the Christian missions, which tried to adopt a peaceful political stance that prohibited all kinds of deviant political activities (as was the case in the CHT). This has changed over recent years, and an increasing number of Adivasi are dissatisfied with the accommodating orientation, which is apparently less successful than the more outspoken and radical standpoint adopted by the CHT activists.<sup>8</sup>

Given this vast asymmetry in attention to, representation of and support for indigenous people in the hills and the plains, there have been feelings of being “double marginalised” among many Plainland Adivasis. But it is not only they who have claimed a marginalised status. Some groups in the CHT have complained as well. The CHT are inhabited by more than ten different groups, which practice different religions, speak different languages, and can be differentiated by their customs. These groups, whose sizes vary considerably, are also concentrated in different areas. Some of these locations are more accessible than others. Smaller groups, especially those living in remoter areas without much access to infrastructure, are less represented than others, as has been shown with regards to the Khumi (Uddin 2008). Moreover, the Chakma and Marma constitute not only the numerical majority, but are also the most powerful groups in terms of political representation. According to the customary administrative system, two Marma and one Chakma *rāja* (kings) control the three circles constituting the CHT, while the other groups are subordinated. This situation has enabled Chakma and Marma to gain certain developmental benefits during the colonial and post-colonial period.

Recent years have brought about intensified cooperation and networking, although vast asymmetries in access to power and representation still exist between the different groups. The celebrations on the occasion of the World's Indigenous People's Day presented the ethnic diversity represented by groups from different parts of Bangladesh. The Indigenous People's Forum has taken a very active stand in representing the claims of indigenous people within, as well as outside the country. The Indigenous People's Forum, also called Adivasi Forum, was founded in 2001 after Shantu Larma, the leader of the main party representing the indigenous groups of the CHT and leader of the insurgency movement until 1997, called all Adivasi leaders and organisations in Bangladesh to a meeting. This meeting was well appreciated and attended by 200 people who agreed to and demanded the formation of one organisation representing all indigenous people in Bangladesh.<sup>9</sup> Today, the Forum has twenty-one member or-

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<sup>8</sup> Expert interview in Dhaka, 03.03.2009.

<sup>9</sup> Information from expert interview in Dhaka, 02.03.2009.

rganisations. Shantu Larma acts as the president, and the general secretary Sanjeeb Drong is assisted by a large staff. Within Bangladesh, the Forum is mainly engaged in lobbying. It tries to connect Plainland Adivasi and Pahari from the CHT, organises cultural events, publishes informative material, supports local campaigns such as the movement against the Modhopur Eco-Park project and has represented indigenous interests in the process for the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP).<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the Forum is responsible for regional networking. The Forum is an official member of the Asia Indigenous Peoples' Pact (AIPP), a Forum-member is currently employed as the Coordinator for the Human Rights Campaign and Policy Advocacy at AIPP's headquarters in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The Forum also networks with a variety of other regional organisations, particularly in India. The Forum is frequently invited to UN meetings, such as the Permanent Forum consultations in New York. For the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs and the European Commission, the Forum serves as a major contact partner. Although some foreign organisations contact smaller groups directly, such as women's groups, the Indigenous People's Forum serves as the contact institution for globally operating institutions and represents Bangladeshis at the meetings called by the UN bodies directly concerned with indigenous people's issues.

Looking somewhat deeper into the field of activism, it is possible to define three dimensions in which social change can be observed. These are located beneath the national realm, as with the emergence of new forms of leadership, as well as transcending national boundaries, like development cooperation. Third, translocal alliances constitute a force that transcends the prefigured limits of the locality.

### *Personalised Leadership*

According to the general secretary of the Indigenous People's Forum, the main turning point in indigenous people's representation in Bangladesh was the Peace Accord in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. First, it has legitimised the political leadership of the CHT. With the exception of those politicians who have joined the main political parties of Bangladesh and who have become involved in the polity, the leadership of the Parbattya Chattragam Jana Samhati Samit (PCJSS), which constituted the militant Shanti Bahini, has gained a larger voice. The leader, Shantu Larma, has become a well-respected and recognised person, able to attract the attention of indigenous people and elicit in them a willingness to be actively engaged in the movement. The post-accord situation enhanced the position of the Devasish Roy, the Chakma

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<sup>10</sup> For details see: <http://www.adb.org/IndigenousPeoples/documents/prsp-meeting.pdf> (03 July 2009)

raja, who became well known as Special Assistant to the Chief Advisor of the Caretaker Government, a post he held until 2008. These persons have become important, nationally and internationally known figures with considerable bargaining power. The formation of the Indigenous People's Forum has shown that the support of Shanti Larma was helpful and generated much popular attention. Second, the Peace Accord resulted in the formation of formal institutions such as the Ministry for Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, with an indigenous person as the minister. Recently, activists have started to demand a separate ministry to address the concerns of Plainland Adivasis.

### *Development Cooperation*

While the first two points discussed above relate to how the CHT Peace Accord has triggered a national movement for indigenous people's rights, the accord has also changed donors' perspectives and access to developmental resources. When I joined the Appraisal Mission for a project of the German-Bangladeshi development cooperation to be implemented by the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), a great number of foreign organisations, especially bi- and multilateral donors, developed an interest in the neglected CHT. As a result of the insurgency and emergency, hardly any development activities had taken place there for many years (see Gerharz 2002).<sup>11</sup> The initial enthusiasm of many organisations, which at times alienated the hill people, who had never experienced an invasion of this kind before, did not always result in long-term activities.<sup>12</sup> However, most donor agencies nowadays are more aware of and sympathetic to the concerns of indigenous people. The UNDP, for example, runs a project called Promotion of Development and Confidence Building in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The European Commission (EC) has repeatedly allocated funds to local NGOs; such funds are also distributed among indigenous organisations. Apart from projects targeting indigenous people directly, there are also programmes dealing with larger issues such as human rights promotion, local governance and democratisation, into which indigenous organisations are increasingly integrated. Several INGOs, such as Oxfam and Action Aid, address indigenous people's issues in their activities, which are often implemented in cooperation with local partners.

Creating interrelations within developmental activities and including indigenous people in mainstream development is important, as one of the activists interviewed stressed. According

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<sup>11</sup> Except for the activities implemented by the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board (CHTDB).

<sup>12</sup> Several donors lost interest after a team of geographers exploring the CHT for Shell were kidnapped in 2001.

to him, there is an urgent need to engage with various bodies representing global development in order to avoid a “reductionist approach”, which looks at indigenous people only as separated from wider society. He highlighted the fact that indigenous people’s development is an integral part of societal development, which encompasses economic, social, cultural and political rights. Although engaging the country offices of development agencies remains important, Bangladesh’s activists are seeking to maximise their appearance in the centres of global development cooperation, such as Geneva and New York, in order to influence the different institutions directly and through inter-personal communication.

### *Alliances with Bengali Academics and Activists*

It has been noted above that the indigenous people in Bangladesh have been subject to anthropological and sociological examination. A remarkable body of literature has contributed to increased global attention on the situation of indigenous people, especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, but also on groups living in the northern parts, especially the Garo. Apart from foreign researchers, a number of Bangladeshi academics have published internationally recognised works on indigenous issues.

Debating the interrelatedness of social anthropology and activism has been a recurrent topic during recent years. Asking whether it is appropriate for social anthropologists and sociologists to advocate for the people they are closely engaged with during research and whether they have certain moral obligations to them is clearly beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>13</sup> However, in the case of Bangladesh we can see that academic work and activism are closely inter-related, especially when the academics are either indigenous themselves or Bengalis who look upon the indigenous peoples’ debate through the lens of broader concerns. This is because, in Bangladesh, university teachers and students have played an important role in political struggles such as the language movement, the liberation movement, the movement against the military-backed governments of General Ziaur Rahman and Muhammad Ershad and, recently, against the caretaker government in August 2007.

Quite a number of Bengali social scientists who are also well-known figures in Bangladeshi “civil society” have been engaged in voicing political positions and viewpoints on conflict and peace, particularly in the CHT. Some of them are engaged in civil society organisations, explicitly combining research and activism on behalf of marginalised groups. An outstanding

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<sup>13</sup> See Karlsson (2003) for an extended discussion of the controversies concerning social anthropologists’ advocacy for indigenous people.



impact, for example, was achieved by the national women's movement, promoting, among others, the case of Kalpana Chakma, an indigenous woman who was abducted and "disappeared" (Guhathakurta 2004; 2001).

As in many developing countries, university teachers are not well paid and therefore depend on some additional income. Many academics engage with foreign development organisations as advisors or conduct assessments as consultants. It is understood that their academic and political perspectives on indigenous peoples influence the policies of development agencies as soon as they get involved, which increases the scope of activists to shape development. At the same time, many academics join the Bangladeshi "civil society", for example human rights organisations, development NGOs, journalists, lawyers and academics who are concerned with advocacy work aimed at meeting the demands of indigenous people.

Since the Peace Accord in the CHT, and possibly earlier, the influence of Bengali civil society activists on indigenous issues has become stronger. This can be seen in the growth of literature on indigenous issues in Bangladesh and the integration of indigenous people's concerns into the activities and reports of Bangladeshi human rights organisations. If we look at the composition of the CHT Commission, which was first established in 1989, there was not a single Bangladeshi representative, probably for reasons of impartiality. The new CHT Commission formed in 2008 has four Bangladeshi members. Two of them are lawyers who live in Bangladesh on a permanent basis. The other two are academics working abroad. The first two in particular are highly controversial figures in the CHT, since they have taken a proactive standpoint for the indigenous people, which has provoked the resistance of Bengali activists in the CHT. That they, as well as other Bengali civil society members, publicly adhere to their position has boosted indigenous people's activism and provides them with a strong moral basis.

Indigenous activists have also complained about being instrumentalised by Bengali NGOs, who attempt to enhance their bargaining position in the competition for donor funds.<sup>14</sup> One activist highlighted how their approach does not include indigenous people as equal citizens, but rather as undeveloped subjects, even more backward than poor Bengalis (see also Gerharz 2002; 2007: Ch. 6.4). In a similar vein, media reports on indigenous people tend to adopt images that highlight the beauty of the exotic. The popularity of such exotic images of the backward, primitive, yet beautiful and interesting "tribals" is embedded into colonial and post-colonial constructions of civilisation and development (van Schendel 1992: 103). This also

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<sup>14</sup> Expert interview in Dhaka, April 2009.

leads to the promotion of indigenous culture as represented by artefacts (textiles, handicrafts, etc.) and performances (dance, singing, theatre) that have a solely aesthetic function and do not take the holistic character of culture and local knowledge into account (see also CHT Commission 1991: 91). Despite these rather critical aspects, it can also be argued that the dissemination of knowledge about indigenous people in general may benefit the recognition of their rights.

#### **4. The Translocalisation of Indigenous Activism**

So far I have tried to lay out different dimensions of networking between indigenous groups within and beyond Bangladesh in order to show how new linkages have been established. Whereas the indigenous activists from the CHT have been engaged in regional and global networks and institutions for quite some time, the inclusion of Plainland Adivasi activists is a relatively new phenomenon. This can largely be explained by the fact that the CHT people have enjoyed special rights and regulations since colonial times, and (albeit disputed) local and regional institutions for political representation and planning since the Peace Accord. The Plainland Adivasi, in contrast, have had very limited opportunities in this respect and could not assert their distinctiveness as a result of a lack of educational resources and political representation (see also Dewan 2007). However, the peace process in the CHT has reinforced the establishment of relationships within the national realm as well as beyond. Although prior to the peace process CHT activists for human rights were probably more visible outside of Bangladesh than inside, where the dominant images relied on constructions such as insurgents, terrorists and a security threat, their networks extend in multiple directions.

Since the late 1990s, the de-militarisation of the Shanti Bahini in the CHT has brought about considerable legitimisation of the CHT leadership as civil society actors in Bangladesh as well as beyond. This has boosted intensified cooperation and institutionalisation at the national level and also across existing territorial and constructed boundaries between Plainland Adivasi and hill people from the CHT. Apart from the rising significance of leadership personalities, we can also witness the impact of foreign development assistance on indigenous people. However, this also implies complicated questions regarding dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, principles of “do no harm”, of access and equality, which are beyond the scope of this paper. A third dimension, closely interrelated, is the intensification of networks with Bengali human rights and development activists.

What we can witness today is a complex web of networks and alliances, which have not only enhanced the potential for Bangladeshi indigenous activists to promote their concerns in global institutions (particularly UN), but also on a national level. On the other hand, this process also enhances indigenous people's visibility and recognition within the local arena, particularly in people's everyday lives. In the following, I wish to raise selected issues that require some deeper investigation, especially within the mundane life-world experiences of indigenous people. If we acknowledge that intensified translocalisation produces dense networks and cooperation, we also have to ask in how far this extensive and far-reaching process produces new conflicts and contestations, coalitions and actor constellations.

## **5. Emerging Issues for Future Research**

It has become clear that intensified interaction and coalition formation between activists from the CHT, Plainland Adivasi and Bengali civil society members brings about far-reaching changes that do not imply only achievements with regard to the enforcement of indigenous people's interests. We rather need to look behind these ostensible results and ask, what expectations and achievements, but also what kinds of conflict, cleavages and ruptures may accompany the translocalisation of indigeneity in Bangladesh. In the following I will briefly present selected areas in which further research is needed in order to understand the impact of the translocalisation on social change and transformation in contemporary Bangladesh.

Already visible in the analysis presented above is that the emergence of new actor constellations entails shifting power relations. New actors are on the rise, while others decline. This leads to new forms of representation entailing different rationalities and targeting different arenas. For example, the interrelatedness of human rights discourses and development cooperation is a complex field which is worthy of exploration. Witnessing the power of rights-based approaches in development cooperation, we need to ask how discourses on indigeneity used by indigenous activists themselves, by representatives of the state and by development experts shape development cooperation and might lead to new forms. Another pertinent, yet neglected field concerns the role of Christian churches and missionaries. Since colonial times, they have been important global development institutions which have had a huge impact on local social change in terms of service delivery and educational development. At the same time, their involvement, particularly in indigenous communities, may reinforce the emergence of inter-religious conflict, especially if we consider the growth of Islamic influence as opposed to growing indigenous activism. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, but also in the northern

parts of Bangladesh it can be observed that religious polarisation increasingly shapes everyday life.<sup>15</sup>

The religious dimension is just one part of the broader field of ethnic polarisation, which is shaped by vast power differentials. These power differentials have been reproduced and reinforced since colonial times and are embedded not just in existing hierarchies between community members, but also in the relationship with the state. A number of scholars have pointed out that the Bangladeshi state has cultivated a culture of violence, particularly against minorities who do not fit into the neat corset of Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism (see Guha-thakurta 2002; Bleie 2005; Mohsin 1997, 2000). The extent to which recent democratisation efforts will be successful in safeguarding indigenous people's rights remains to be seen.

One important issue of great concern for all indigenous people in densely populated Bangladesh is land rights. Violations of special rights to land in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Adivasis' access to land in the past have deepened the division between indigenous people and Bengalis. The rise of translocal activism, accompanied by greater bargaining power, will certainly foster conflicts over land, which may also entail further aggravating violent outbreaks. In turn, this conflict over land, which has become one of the most important resources, will have important implications for development cooperation.

Focusing on the changes taking place between and within different indigenous groups, two dynamics need to be pointed out. On the one hand, we can see that old, established strategic groups have been quick in safeguarding their positions. This concerns the traditional leadership, which still remains relatively undisputed, but also the PCJSS in the CHT. Since the Peace Accord, the political leadership has been able to maintain its position but has increasingly become subject to protest and contestation. The struggles for power in the realm of internal politics will certainly affect the power and scope for action of translocal activist networks in the near future. On the other hand, we certainly see that local activists' "exposure to the world" changes their world views in general, and more specifically, their visions of development.<sup>16</sup> While a handful of activists tend to live a comparatively comfortable life in Dhaka and abroad, people living in the villages strongly contest the activists' claims to represent their interests.<sup>17</sup> How far these emerging cleavages within allegedly homogenous groups may shape indigenous activism requires a closer look in the course of detailed ethnographic work.

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<sup>15</sup> This could be observed in north-eastern Bangladesh in April 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Ghosh (2006) shows how the experience of visiting Switzerland has led to the emergence of new images and ideals of what development can be.

<sup>17</sup> This was expressed by villagers during a field visit in Rajshahi in April 2009.

Finally, the manifold translocal interrelations give rise to new development concepts and perspectives, which originate not only from western development cooperation, but highlight priorities and visions originating elsewhere. One activist in Dhaka explained to me in a long evening conversation how Bangladeshi indigenous people can learn from “more advanced” movements in parts of India to develop an “adivasi development vision”. How such visions are transmitted and how they transform into specific local perspectives are among the questions we still have to ask.

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