

Beyond and Beneath the Nation-State: Bangladeshi Indigenous People’s Activism between Marginalisation and Self-Assertion

Eva Gerharz, Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University

eva.gerharz@uni-bielefeld.de

DRAFT – Please do not cite or circulate without autor’s permission

On the 9th of 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 head-dress, 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, honorary persons from the civil society and a government representative gave speeches again, elaborating on the claims of indigenous people in Bangladesh.

This strong and visible performance of indigenous activism in Bangladesh’s capitol 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 hardly 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, only very few other notions for ethnic ascription existed. I remember one person who advised me that the term “ethnic minority” would be more appropriate nowadays. Some intellectuals adopted the term “pahadi” or “hill people” to choose a politically more 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 context¹ is now regarded as an appropriate, politically correct label.

What we are witnessing in Bangladesh today as compared to the situation ten years ago is a significant increase in networking locally, across national boundaries, as well as 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 strategically using them 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 the 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, which may perpetuate developmental deficits and create obstacles to the emergence of more just and equal societies².

Observing that activism transcends borders and is increasingly becoming a global issue led by coalitions and networks which constitute a “global civil society” is nothing new of course. There is a comprehensive body of literature available, demonstrating the rise of transnational activism obtained by means of in-depth empirical observations. 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 simplified manner. Therefore, I will briefly discuss the state of affairs, highlighting critical perspectives on conventional approaches to transnational activism and make an argument for developing an approach based on the analytical concept of translocality. Then, I will 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” at 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 does not only relate 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 po-

¹ 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.

² Reference to rights-based approaches.

tential 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.

Debating Transnational Activism

The creation of networks across borders and on a global scale can enhance marginalised groups' bargaining position within the framework of the nation-state. This has been demonstrated in a growing body of literature dealing with transnational activism which has emerged over the last ten years (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Tarrow 2005; and others). This body of literature has diverted attention to a very important phenomenon characterising globalisation and has therefore made a notable contribution to understanding the 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, e.g. of activists' movement 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 blocked 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 most literature on transnational activism, with its strong bias towards structural relations constituting transnational space, can show. I will briefly discuss three perspectives addressing these shortcomings.

An important critique is that by Julie Stewart (2004) in an article about the Guatemalan indigenous rights movement. She contends that the boomerang model, does not 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. Secondly, 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. Thirdly, 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).

Moving in a similar direction but relating to current research on transnational activism in a broader sense, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (2007) discusses three critical points in recent discussions on transnational activism. Based on investigations into the paradoxes of transnational movements against dams in South Asia, she seeks to look beyond the shortcomings as she defines them. First, she challenges the assumption that political gains are continuous and reliable by arguing that states may make tactical concessions which can go on forever³. It is thus an empirical question whether a movement can make lasting achievements. The second critique relates to the effectiveness of civil society organisations without taking other explanatory factors into account. This argument calls for a thorough and far-reaching contextualisation of activists’ achievements, instead of accepting mono-causal explanations. Thirdly, 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, but also their composition are marked by heterogeneity and diversity and are conflict prone.

Finally, I refer to Kaushik Ghosh (2006) who has 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 is implicit in approaches to transnational activism by analysing the potentially undermining effects of transnational discourses on indigeneity. This actually may have a marginalising effect on the majority of indigenous populations in India (2006: 503). In particular, he contrasts two different (ideal) types of activists, one cosmopolitan and one local, and shows how indigeneity is represented by employing different discourses which 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 questioning the logic entailed in transnationalism in general, e.g.

³ With her concept of the “cunning state”, Randeria (2003) points at a similar phenomenon.

that the emphasis lies on transcending the boundaries of the nation-state instead of taking into account the multiple dimensions and scales which organise sociality in the globalised world. It is not just de-territorialisation and border-crossing which determines and shapes the lives of human being today, but the many different forms of de-localisation and re-localisation which need not necessarily be of territorial nature⁴. In this paper I wish to work towards a framework which 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 not just to focus on the global-local dimension or on those phenomena which 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 reference⁵. This kind of viewpoint presupposes that we focus less on structures, which emerge as a result of networking, but on highlighting individual and collective agency. 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 as well as at its boundaries. Hence, this paper is based on the assumption that a translocalization of Bangladeshi indigenous activism has taken place which implies a number of changes in representation and strategic action, interaction, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

The findings displayed in this paper are part of a larger ongoing research project on the translocalization of Bangladeshi indigenous people's activism. It 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 months stay, I spend several weeks in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and investigated ethnic identity formation following the Peace Accord of 2002 (Gerharz 2000). Only eight months later I returned as a member of an appraisal mission organized by German Technical Cooperation (GTZ). With the team of consultants, I visited various parts of the CHT and collected a variety of data based on interviews, observations and (group) discussions. These were supplemented with ethnographic research within my "private" every-day life context. 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 ab-

⁴ See Appadurai (2001) for a comprehensive statement on locality.

⁵ Lachenmann (2008), Gerharz (2009), Salzbrunn (2008), etc..

sence, I maintained close relationships as a member of the German Bangladesh-Forum, a network in which German NGOs, church-based organisations, human rights organisations, groups of Bangladeshi living in Germany and individual members mainly lobby for Bangladesh⁶. 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 eight to ten Bangladeshi guests. When Bangladeshi activists visit Germany, we organise lobbying tours to Germany ministries, political foundations, think-tanks 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 the two weeks I conducted interviews with a number of indigenous and Bengali activists, researchers, NGO representatives and visited three field sites in the northern districts of Mymensingh and Rajshahi. The research is far from being completed, the analysis presented is thus very preliminary. Moreover I wish to present preliminary findings geared towards assumptions which allow me to dig somewhat deeper in order to find out how the translocalization of indigenous activism produces social change in different ways.

Indigenusness becomes Global...

With the establishment of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) at the United Nations (UN) in 1982, indigenous people have become the first grassroots movement to gain direct access to the major global governance institution, states (Karlsson 2003: 403). This successful move was based on a global indigenous people’s movement which attempted to lobby to secure their rights through the UN mechanism because they felt that indigenous rights are strongly neglected in many of the national laws and policy frameworks. But the working group was only a start for 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 for 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

⁶ <http://www.bangladesh-forum.de/> (accessed 27.07.2009).

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 eye's view, the first Decade 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 which is, as a subsidiary body to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), in New York. 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 was 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 indigenous fellowship programme established. The decade also generated the International Day of the World's Indigenous People to be celebrated on August 9th, which as I have shown in the beginning, is also popular in Bangladesh.

This global institutional set-up provides a forceful mechanism for representing the interests and claims of indigenous people. These are the result of a well documented historical process. Since the 1980s, indigenous people have received growing scholarly attention, particularly by social anthropologists, but also by sociologists, political scientists and law specialists. Muehlebach 2001 (2001) summarised the history of the movement and the rise of formalised representation at the United Nations and shows, that the movement already started in the 1950s with the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. The purpose of this organization 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 further emphasises that two elements make up the indigenous strategy of self-representation:

1. 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 which are distinct from the national mainstream.
2. political aim of self-determination, which has so far been denied by most nation-states on territory of which indigenous people live.

This global framework for representing 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 many postcolonial states' claims of national sovereignty. Bleie (2005: 60) points out that India, for example, maintains that the country has no indigenes, but 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 completely⁷. Acknowledging the existence of indigenous people in Bangladesh suggests that the Bengali 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 before and after the liberation war in 1971. But we need to keep in mind that the marginalisation of indigenous people by nation-states remains a problem which does not only affect 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 extraordinary 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 how it has changed the bargaining position of activists in Bangladesh.

⁷ The First Secretary of the Bangladesh Embassy in Germany announced in a speech on April 2008 that there are no minorities in Bangladesh.

...and 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. Even though the voices of the CHT people who had been engaged in armed conflict since the mid-1970s and, as a result, subject to human rights violations, evictions and displacement, were at times heard by global 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 of also other indigenous groups in Bangladesh. In the following, I intend to show first, why the CHT 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 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 the 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 (IW-GIA)⁸ directed public attention to the CHT. Refugee movements to the neighbouring Indian states Mizoram and Tripura provoked international criticism as well. 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 (f.e. 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 had produced the well-recognised reports "Life is not Ours" between 1990 and 2000, was reactivated in 2008 and

⁸ <http://www.iwgia.org/sw617.asp> (accessed 27.07.2009).

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.

Secondly, 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. The royal family circle especially and the present chief, Raja Devasish Roy have put much effort into promoting the interests of the CHT people both nationally, as well as internationally. The political activities which 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).

Thirdly, since colonial times, the high concentration of ethnic groups and the vast linguistic and cultural diversity, which makes the CHT one of the world’s hotspots of diversity, has attracted the attention and fascination of social and cultural anthropologists. As early as the late 19th century, the colonial administrator T.H. 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/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 are funded by their western counterparts and, therefore have access to education and health facilities. Their “indigenesness” 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 networking capacity. 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 part 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 Bangladesh, 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. Additionally, a visible number of Garo women have migrated to Dhaka and other urban centres to work in beauty parlours (reference!). Regarding political representation, Plainland Adivasi activism in general was largely controlled by the Christian missions, which tried to adopt a peaceful political stance which prohibited all kinds of deviant political activities (as it was the case in the CHT). This has changed over the past years and an increasing number of Adivasi are unsatisfied with the accommodating orientation which is apparently less successful than the more outspoken and radical standpoint adopted by the CHT activists⁹.

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 them 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. The groups, whose size varies 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 it has been shown for the Khumi (Uddin 2008). Moreover, the Chakma and Marma constitute not only the numerical majority but are the most powerful groups in terms of political representation. According to the customary administrative system, two Marma and one Chakma *raja* (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 period¹⁰.

⁹ expert interview in Dhaka, 03.03.2009.

¹⁰ (minorities within minorities discussion)

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 of Bangladesh¹¹. Today, the Forum has twenty-one member organisations. 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 information material, supports local campaigns such as the movement against the Modhopur Eco-Park project, and has represented indigenous interests in the PRSP process¹². 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 headquarter in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The Forum also networks with a variety of other regional organisations, particularly in India. Quite frequently, the Forum is invited to UN meetings, such as the Permanent Forum consultations in New York. For the International Working Group on Indigenous Peoples 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 Peoples 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.

Personalised Leadership

According to the general secretary of the Indigenous Peoples 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. Apart from those poli-

¹¹ information from expert interview in Dhaka, 02.03.2009.

¹² for details see: <http://www.adb.org/IndigenousPeoples/documents/prsp-meeting.pdf> (03.08.2009)

ticians who have joined the main political parties of Bangladesh and who have become involved in the polity, the leadership of the Parbattya Chatragam Jana Samhati Samit (PCJSS) which had constituted the militant Shanti Bahini, gained larger voice. The leader, Shantu Larma, has become a well-respected and recognised person able to attract indigenous people's attention and willingness to be actively engaged in the movement. The postaccord situation enhanced the position of the Devasish Roy, the Chakma raja, who became well known as a Special Assistant to the Chief Advisor of the Caretaker Government 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. Secondly, the Peace Accord resulted in the formation of formal institutions like 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 relate to how the CHT Peace Accord has triggered a national movement for indigenous people's rights, it 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. Due to the insurgency and emergency, almost no development activities had taken place there for many years¹³ (see Gerharz 2002). Although 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 produce long-term activities¹⁴, most donor agencies nowadays are more aware and sympathetic to indigenous people's concerns. The UNDP, for example, implements 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 which are also distributed among indigenous organisations. Apart from projects targeting indigenous people directly, there are also programmes on larger issues such as human rights promotion, local governance and democratisation into which indigenous organisations are increasingly integrated. Several INGOs such as

¹³ Except from the activities implemented by the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board (CHTDB).

¹⁴ Several donors lost interest after a team of geographers exploring the CHT for Shell were kidnapped in 2001.

Oxfam and Action Aid, address indigenous people's issues in their activities which are often implemented in cooperation with local partners.

Creating interrelations with developmental activities and including indigenous people into mainstream development is important, as one of the activists interviewed stressed. According to him, there is an urgent necessity to engage with various bodies representing global development in order to avoid a "reductionist approach" which looks only at indigenous people as separated from larger 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 communication¹⁵.

Alliances with Bengali Academics and Activists

It has been pointed out 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 to the situation of indigenous people especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, but also on groups living in the northern parts, especially the Garo (Bal 2007). 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 an ever-recurring 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 paper¹⁶. However, in the case of Bangladesh we can witness that academic work and activism are closely interrelated, 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 the 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.

¹⁵ significance of proximity.

¹⁶ See Karlsson (2003) for an extended discussion of controversies concerning social anthropologists' advocacy for indigenous people.

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

Like 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 activists’ scope to shape development. At the same time, many academics join the Bangladeshi “civil society”, e.g. human rights organisations, development NGOs, journalists, lawyers, and academics who are concerned with advocacy work to meet the demands of indigenous people.

At least since the peace accord in the CHT, the influence of Bengali civil society activists on indigenous issues has become stronger. This can be seen on the basis of the growth of literature on indigenous issues in Bangladesh, the integration of indigenous people’s concerns in the activities and reports of human rights organisations such as Ain-O-Shalish Kendra (ASK), or Odhikar. 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. Especially the first two are hotly disputed figures in the CHT, since they have taken a pro-active 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 have boosted indigenous people’s activism and provides them with a morally strong basis.

However, indigenous activists have also complained about being instrumentalised by Bengali NGOs who attempt to enhance their bargaining position in the competition for donor funds¹⁷. But 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

¹⁷ expert interview in Dhaka, April 2009.

Gerharz 2002; 2007: Ch. 6.4). In a similar vein, the media reporting on indigenous people tend to adopt images which 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 1993: 103). This also leads to the promotion of indigenous culture as represented by artefacts (textiles, handicrafts, etc.) and performances (dance, singing, theatre) which have only an 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.

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 rather new phenomenon. This can be largely explained with 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 very limited possibilities 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 CHT activists for human rights before the Peace Process were probably more visible outside 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, also across territorial and constructed boundaries exist 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 for indigenous people. However, this also implies complicated questions regarding dynamics of inclusion and exclusion,

principles of “do no harm”, 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 Bangladeshi indigenous activists’ potentials to promote their concerns in both global institutions (particularly UN), but also nationally. 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 which require some deeper investigation, especially within the mundane life-world experiences of indigenous people. If we acknowledge intensified translocalization producing 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 constellations.

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 bring about far-reaching changes which imply not 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 translocalization of indigeneity in Bangladesh. In the following I will briefly present selected areas, in which further research is needed to understand the impact of the translocalization on social change and transformation in contemporary Bangladesh.

What we can already witness 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 being explored. 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 may lead to new forms. Another pertinent, yet neglected field concerns the role of the Christian churches and missionaries. Since colonial times, these have been important global development institutions which have had a huge impact on local social change in terms of service delivery and educational devel-

opment. At the same time, their involvement particularly in indigenous communities may reinforce the emergence of inter-religious conflict, particularly 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 we can observe that religious polarisation is increasingly shaping people's everyday-life¹⁸.

The religious dimension is just one part of the broader field of ethnic polarisation which is, shaped by vast power differentials which have been reproduced and reinforced since colonial times. These power differentials are not just embedded 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 Guhathakurta 2002; Bleie 2005; Mohsin 1997, 2000). It remains to be seen how far recent democratisation efforts will be successful in safeguarding indigenous peoples rights.

One important issue of great concern for all indigenous people in densely populated Bangladesh are land rights. Violations of special rights to land in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Adivasis' access to land in the past have deepened the cleavage between indigenous people and Bengali. The rise of translocal activism accompanied with greater bargaining power will certainly foster conflicts over land which may also entail even further aggravating violent outbreaks. This conflict over land, which has become one of the most important resources, in turn, 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 witness 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 translocal activist networks' power and scope for action 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 development¹⁹. While a handful of activists tends to live a jetset life in Dhaka and abroad, people liv-

¹⁸ This could be observed in north-eastern Bangladesh in April 2009.

¹⁹ Ghosh (2006) shows how the experience of visiting Switzerland has led to the emergence of new images and ideals of what development can be.

ing in the villages strongly contest the activists' claims to represent their interests²⁰. How far these emerging cleavages within the allegedly homogenous groups may shape indigenous activism requires a closer look in the course of detailed ethnographic work.

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 from 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 needs to be part of the questions we still have to ask.

Bibliography

- Appadurai, Arjun 2001: *The Production of Locality*, in: Beyer, Peter (ed.): *Religion im Prozeß der Globalisierung*, Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, pp. 99-124
- Bal, Ellen 2007: *They Ask if We Eat Frogs. Garo Ethnicity in Bangladesh*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
- Bernot, Lucien 1964: *Ethnic Groups of the Chittagong Hill Tracts*, in: Bessaignet, Pierre (ed.): *Social Research in East Pakistan*, Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, pp. 137-171
- Bertocci, Peter J. 1989: *Ressource Development and Ethnic Conflict in Bangladesh: The Case of the Chakmas in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*, in: Vajpeyi, Dhirandra; Malik, Yogendra (eds.): *Religious and Ethnic Minority Politics in South Asia*, New Delhi: pp. 139-173
- Bleie, Tone 2005: *Tribal Peoples, Nationalism and the Human Rights Challenge. The Adivasis of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: University Press Limited
- Brauns, Claus-Dieter; Lorenz G. Löffler 1996: *Mru. Bergbewohner im Grenzgebiet von Bangladesch*, Basel, Boston, Stuttgart: Birkhäuser Verlag
- CHT Commission 1991: *"Life is not Ours" Land and Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*, Amsterdam, Copenhagen: CHT Commission
- Dewan, Monte 2007: *Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh and their Access to Development*, in: *Solidarity. Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum*, Vol. 2007, pp. 131-133
- Gerharz, Eva 2002: *Dilemmas in Planning Crisis Prevention: NGOs in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh*, in: *The Journal of Social Studies*, Vol. 97, pp. 19-36
- Gerharz, Eva 2007: *Translocal Negotiations of Reconstruction and Development in Jaffna, Sri Lanka*, Bielefeld: unpublished PhD Thesis

²⁰ This was expressed by villagers during a field visit in Rajshahi in April 2009.

- Gerharz, Eva 2000: *The Construction of Identities. The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh*
- Ghosh, Kaushik 2006: *Between Global Flows and Local Dams: Indigenouness, Locality and the Transnational Sphere in Jahrkand, India*, in: *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 501-534
- Guhathakurta, Meghna 2002: *The Nature of the Bangladeshi State*, in: *Ain-O-Salish Kendra* (ed.): *Human Rights in Bangladesh*, Dhaka: University Press Limited, pp. 19-31
- Guhathakurta, Meghna 2004: *Women Negotiating Change: The Structure and Transformation of Gendered Violence in Bangladesh*, in: *Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 16, No. 2/3, pp. 193-211
- ICIMOD 2007: *First International Decade of the World's Indigenous People in Asia, 1995-2004. Assessment Synthesis Report*, Kathmandu: International Centre of Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)
- Karlsson, Bengt G. 2003: *Anthropology and the 'Indigenous Slot'*, in: *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp. 403-423
- Kaufmann, H. E. 1962: *Observations on the Agriculture of the Chittagong Hill-Tribes*, in: Owen, John E. (ed.): *Sociology in East Pakistan*, Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, pp. 111-134
- Keck, Margaret E.; Kathryn Sikkink 1998: *Activists Beyond Borders. Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press
- Lewin, Thomas H. 1884: *Wild Races of the Eastern Frontier of India*, Delhi: Mittal Publications
- Löffler, Lorenz G. 1968: *Basic Democracies in den Chittagong Hill Tracts, Ostpakistan*, in: *Sociologus. Zeitschrift für empirische Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, Vol. 18, pp. 152-171
- Mey, Wolfgang 1980: *Politische Systeme in den Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangla Desh*, Bremen: Übersee-Museum Bremen
- Mey, Wolfgang; (ed.) 1988: *Wir wollen nicht euch - wir wollen euer Land. Macht und Menschenrechte in den Chittagong Hill Tracts*, Göttingen: Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker
- Mohsin, Amena 2003: *The Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: On the Difficult Road to Peace*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers
- Mohsin, Amena 1997: *The Politics of Nationalism. The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*, Dhaka: University Press Ltd.
- Muehlebach, Andrea 2001: *'Making Place' at the United Nations: Indigenous Cultural Politics at the U.N. Working Group on Indigenous Populations*, in: *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 415-448

- Oldham, Paul; Miriam Anne Frank 2008: 'We the Peoples...' The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, in: *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 5-9
- Pfaff-Czarnecka, Joanna 2007: *Challenging Goliath: People, Dams, and the Paradoxes of Transnational Critical Movements*, in: Hiroshi, Ishi; Gellner, David; Nawa, Katsuo (eds.): *Political and Social Transformations in North India and Nepal*, Delhi: Manohar, pp. 399-433
- Randeria, Shalini 2003: *Glocalization of Law: Environmental Justice, World Bank, NGOs and the Cunning State of India*, in: *Current Sociology*, Vol. 51, No. 3/4, pp. 305-328
- Stewart, Julie 2004: *When Local Troubles Become Transnational: The Transformation of a Guatemalan Indigenous Rights Movement*, in: *Mobilization: An International Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 259-278
- Tarrow, Sidney 2005: *The New Transnational Activism*, Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press
- Uddin, Nasir (2008): *Living on The Margin: The Positioning of The 'Khumi' within The Sociopolitical and Ethnic History of The Chittagong Hill Tracts*, in: *Asian Ethnicity* Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 33-53
- van Schendel, Willem 1992: *The Invention of the "Jummas". State Formation and Ethnicity in Southeast Bangladesh*, in: *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 95-128
- van Schendel, Willem; Wolfgang Mey; Aditya Kumar Dewan 2000: *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Living in a Borderland*, Bangkok: White Lotus Press