

Approaching indigenous activism from the ground: experiences from Bangladesh

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PRELIMINARY DRAFT

Indigenous people's movements are among the most fascinating, albeit contradictory, social phenomena: On the one hand, hardly any other group has been able to establish itself globally so successfully. Indigenous people have institutionalised global pressure groups frequently addressing institutions to form global representative bodies, and to include their issues in the development agendas. Moreover, indigenous pressure groups have managed to gain space for articulation and representation with regard to global issues such as climate change and resource management. Seen from this angle, indigenous people constitute a successful transnational movement par excellence. On the other hand, indigenous populations are constructed and construct themselves, as confined to often remote localities. Their positioning as localised and the relating of their claims to their special relationship to the land on which they live, turns the local into an important resource when negotiating for indigenous rights in global forums .

Although the movement has successfully globalised itself, within nation-states with indigenous populations, indigenous people, however, often constitute minorities who tend to be marginalised and excluded from the access to rights and privileges which are designed to fulfil the demands of a national society's majority. The recognition of their special rights as formulated in international treaties remains far from secure. Empirically we can witness how the assumption developed in the scholarship on transnational activism, proclaiming that transnational movements are successful in pressuring for the reformulation of national policies, falls short of explaining the various contradictions and modes of negotiation taking place at a number of different levels and interfaces which may result in a lack of concessions. Recent research findings reveal that the actor-constellations shaping the process of recognising indigenous people's rights as well as their agendas and policies are much more complex than a perspective which focuses on transnational networking can reveal. Critical investigations have shown that the focus on the transnational dimensions glosses over the divergent interests and conflicts within the movement and fails to reveal internal power hierarchies (Stewart 2004). It has also been argued that transnationalised movements may operate at different levels simultaneously which entails contradictions and complexities instead of unified action on behalf of uncontested political interests (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2007). 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. The complexity of divergent interests and constellations characterising the movements themselves and the spaces in which they

operate calls for a thorough contextualisation which allows us to take various, quite often divergent rationalities and interests into account (see also Ghosh 2006; Gandhi 2003).

By investigating the emergence of indigenous activism in contemporary Bangladesh, I attempt to explore how indigenous activism is negotiated within translocal space. The aim is to reveal how the indigenous movement positions itself in local, national and global contexts, how it makes use of local and global repertoires, and what kind of cultural processes determine the negotiations between the various actors involved. An important dimension concerns the ways how indigenous activists represent indigenous concerns and what kind of strategies they employ. This will help to assess the consequences of these activities for local social change which is becoming particularly important in the context of recognition of minority rights, democratisation and development. Considering the developing nations' political cultures and institutions as highly problematic with regard to good governance, e.g. structural inequalities, ethnic exclusion and human rights violations, investigating the patterns of and thereby the potentials of indigenous activism and its border-crossing dimensions remains an important exercise for ensuring equality and developmental benefits for all citizens. In order to approach this complex field, a methodological perspective which allows us to look beyond the structural relations will be developed to overcome the images of harmonious and productive cooperation within and among existing networks and institutions within and across local and national boundaries. Such a framework needs to envisage actor constellations across predefined spatial entities. Based on an empirically grounded perspective it requires us to show how spatial and symbolic boundaries are constituted within specific constellations and situations locally, translocally, nationally, transnationally and globally.

Bangladeshi Indigenous Activism – The Field

The small South Asian country of Bangladesh has had more than 45 so-called tribal groups living on its territory. Numerically, however, they constitute less than four per cent of the population. The largest concentration of so-called jumma people is found in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the south-east, other groups live on the plains in northern Bangladesh. Especially in the CHT, indigenous activism is not a recent phenomenon. From 1975 until 1997, political and militant activists, the Shanti Bahini, were engaged in an armed conflict for the autonomy of the area which had a special status during British colonialism. The struggle was recognised worldwide and opened access to and spaces for articulating the Jummas' grievances in international groups and forums (van Schendel 1992). A Peace Accord which was signed by the Jummas' political leadership and the Government of Bangladesh in De-

ember 1997 enabled activists to transform the movement from one stereotyped as “terrorist” to a nationally more accepted political movement. The Peace Accord, however, has not been fully implemented yet and recent outbreaks of ethnic violence (February 2010) reveal that these groups still face numerous challenges in future. The new conditions have also opened new vistas for networking with activists representing the adivasi from the plains in the north. Most of these groups are highly marginalised in a number of respects. Many Garo, a predominantly Christianised group have managed to acquire a good average level of education thanks to missionary efforts. They have benefitted from the special status of the Garo Hills in neighbouring Meghalaya (India) under British colonialism (Bal 2007). Thanks to their educational qualifications, the Garo have also managed to get access to the white collar job market in Dhaka. Others, like the Santals living in the north-west are very disadvantaged in terms of standard development indicators, but also in terms of their legal rights (Bleie 2005). During a field visit in Rajshahi district for example, some village community leader complained that they were systematically excluded from the recognition of rights. Bengalis dominating the local decision-making bodies exploited out their linguistic advantages, and their contacts to more powerful persons and institutions including the judiciary.

The formation of a national Indigenous People’s Forum and a variety of other new institutions and platforms concerned with the recognition of indigenous rights in Bangladesh in general has considerably changed indigenous people’s access to the national public and political decision-making processes. At this level, global events such as the World Indigenous People’s Day have gained much popularity during the last ten years. The forum’s leadership has also gained recognition in global forums such as the United Nation’s Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) and the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP). However, there are still a great number of shortcomings and limitations to guaranteeing indigenous people’s equality. Despite the long tradition of social activism for inclusive citizenship large parts of the mainstream population not only lack access to basic services but also to their civil rights (Kabeer 2005). Policy makers have repeatedly emphasised that the developmental problems of the mainstream society were more essential and more important than ensuring the rights of minorities. With this kind of argument, many of the concessions made with signing international conventions remain unimplemented. Here, we can already see the discrepancies between what has been said and actually done and the logics of manipulating less powerful actors with strategic concessions that are never implemented.

Looking at the emergence of the new networks addressing the grievances of indigenous people, the first challenge is to map out the structural relations between the various actors and groups involved and to comprehend the actor-constellations in general. My major con-

cern then is to trace the dimensions of demarcation across symbolic and territorial boundaries to depict the shifting nature of constellations and coalitions situated differently in time and space. For example, we can witness that ethnic boundary-drawing constitutes one central mechanism considerably shaping indigenous activism. Some leaders representing the jumma from the CHT and the most advantaged Garo from the north dominate the national movement whereas the majority of groups living in the plains remain highly marginalised. At the same time, power differentials within the groups have led to conflicts between leaders who identify themselves with the local or the national realm. We also need to consider the various forms of negotiation which become central in different terrains. Whereas activists may feel the necessity to apply a certain strategy in the regional context, it may be possible that the global arena is ruled by completely different rationalities. It is therefore essential to investigate how different forms of knowledge are adopted, translated or vernacularized by whom, for which audience and under which conditions. These processes are negotiated quite often in very contested ways and are shaped by internal power-hierarchies and shifting constellations of belonging within the movement, but also in demarcation from others, particularly the ethnic majority within the state and the national government.

Based on emic conceptions and rationalities, processes of negotiation at selected interfaces will be investigated in this paper. I draw primarily on the data collected during a number of field visits over the last twelve years. In 1999 I visited Bangladesh for the first time and conducted an in-depth research into ethnic identity formation in the CHT. This was followed up in 2000 with a study on development cooperation in the post-conflict setting. In 2008 and 2009 I visited Bangladesh three times and interviewed a considerable number of activists, some of them more than once. In Rajshahi, Mymensingh and Modhupur districts on the northern plains I had the opportunity to gain preliminary insights into Garo and Santal activism. In September 2009 I was allowed to spend a few days in Kagrachhari and Rangamati districts in the CHT, where I conducted some interviews with NGO representatives, women activists and indigenous politicians. In addition to the research on-site, my engagement in the lobbying work of the German network Bangladesh-Forum provided me with valuable insights into the many facets of indigenous activism and politics as well as into the policies and approaches adopted by development and human rights organisations and policy-makers at the national and European level. Its biannual conferences have also provided space for research since a considerable number of Bangladeshi activists were present. However, the research still lacks ethnographic depth which will be conducted during the next year. This paper therefore, is based on preliminary assumptions. Investigating the inner and outer dynamics in a more comprehensive way requires methodological tools, which enable the researcher to move between and beyond the various dimensions and levels, e.g. an open process which is flexi-

ble enough to have a glimpse into sites located at different scales. To gain a comprehensive picture of the landscape of indigenous activism, research needs to show the manifold constellations, coalitions, formal and informal networks as well as the power constellations between them. Why do activists decide to cooperate, to form networks and to ally with other organisations in order to go global? What is their personal background, why have they been selected by their constituencies to represent them? How do they assess the potentials of their position and the organisations and networks they are taking part in? Questions of this kind require multiple methods in order to reveal the subjective perspectives and positions as well as the various dimensions of interaction between meaningful actors in this field. A systematic analysis of individual trajectories, their contextualisation and supplementary analysis of the existing networks and coalitions reveals how local groups are involved in the global theatre of indigenous activism. Analysis at this level also takes into account how the different actors construct spatiality in the sense of developing horizons of varying reach. At the same time, depicting such constructions and representations necessitates locating these as embedded into actor-constellations at different levels of analysis. Based on the data already collected, three arenas are of enormous interest and have the potentials to shed light on the existing knowledge about indigenous activism.

Processes of Vernacularization and Adoption

The concept of vernacularization serves the purpose of analysing the ways that transnational ideas such as human rights are adopted in local social settings (Merry 2006). It particularly concerns the space “in-between” and looks at how intermediaries translate between the different levels. Recognising that indigenous rights are, similar to human rights, taken as a potentially universal legal framework, it is particularly interesting how the globalised language of indigenous activism has been adopted. How do different actors make use of the terms, in which contexts and what do they expect from this? Are the notions themselves essential to communicate with others, how do they relate to adopting the principles formulated in the international treaties? How do they go together with local or regional notions?

The successive Bangladeshi governments up to now have denied recognising the notion of “indigenous people” officially. Although Bangladesh has ratified a great number of international conventions, these do not include those which address the rights of indigenous people directly (ILO Convention 169, UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). The ILO Convention 107 for Indigenous and Tribal Populations was ratified in 1972, but the provisions remain mostly unimplemented, as do the provisions formulated in other conventions and dec-

larations (AIPP 2009). In Bangladesh's public sphere, however, I was confronted with various debates and discussions on the notion of indigenes. In line with neighbouring India (Bleie 2005: 60), Bangladesh officially refuses to adopt the notion and argues that Bangladesh has no indigenes. Some individuals but also NGO representatives argued that if the ethnic minorities would be assigned the status as indigenes, this would automatically degrade the Bengali majority to non-indigenes. The First Secretary of the Bangladesh Embassy in Germany even claimed that there are no minorities in Bangladesh, which is a strong reference to the founding principles of the Bangladeshi state as the nation of Bengalis (see f.e. Mohsin 2003; van Schendel 2009). Secondly, the use of the denial of indigenes goes together with repressive practices concerning other forms of globalised languages. NGO representatives from the CHT reported, that apart from "indigenous people", they refrained from using the notion "human rights", because they fear that the NGO Affairs Bureau would not only reject the funding proposal but freeze all funds and even cancel the organisation's registration as an NGO, as had already happened in the case of one local organisation. The NGO activists described how they developed different strategies to convey their messages on human rights to the people. For example, Indigenous People's Day on August 9th is celebrated even in remote villages. There has also been a trend to adopt other international days (Women's Day, Volunteer's Day) to raise the awareness of civil rights. The activists also reported that they make use of other codes in their people-centred programmes. For example, they place emphasis on indigenous tradition and culture. They would encourage women to wear ethnic dress and to observe local customs with regard to food preparation, cultivation methods and handicrafts. But they also reported that the national media and civil society strengthened their position recently by using the "forbidden terms" more freely. However, apparently even UNDP faced some pressure from the governmental authorities when they did not comply with the national norms. A third observation concerns activists who have adopted the logic sustained by global discourses on indigenes. At this level, most interesting ambivalences became apparent. One young couple (lawyer and researcher) for example stressed that their identity as belonging to the Chakma group based on the traditional shifting cultivation (jhum), traditional customs and customary laws, and traditional culture. Regarding developmental issues, they also argued in a strongly traditionalist way. Both of them, however, spent more time in Dhaka than in their hometown, were attracted to modern lifestyles and educational progress including new opportunities abroad. At this point, the contradictions in the indigenous discourse become evident and it will be illuminating to look deeper into the adaptation of semantics as well as the related concepts in order to depict the future vision of society which emerges out of this ambivalent positioning. This raises questions concerning the manifestation of social inequalities, they hint at internal power differentials with regard to access to resources, but also access to knowledge.

Interplay of Different Knowledge Domains

Indigenous activism takes place within a variety of domains and sectors. Especially in developing countries like Bangladesh, civil society members' activism is most often related to development cooperation in different ways. This case shows that indigenous interests and national developmental goals have often been contradictory in the past. Which contrasting logics of action guide developers, activists and the local population? How do indigenous pressure groups address such discrepancies? What strategic concessions are made by the state and donors? What strategies do activists aspire to at the different levels of decision-making?

Shortly after the Peace Agreement was signed, international development organisations had great interest in planning and implementing development projects in the CHT. The missions and assessments dealing with possible projects were plenty and, quite often, related to the overarching goal of promoting peace through development (Gerharz 2002). This process of opening up was accompanied by large scale transformations of the local arena of development experts. Several NGO representatives in the CHT complained that the bigger organisations such as UNDP and others tie up the scarce local knowledge resources. Local development experts who had gained some experience in local NGO or in government service were hired and employed for disproportional wages on a per diem basis. Emphasising that “development should not be a business”, one activist asserted that “they are taking away our brains” and “steal our ideas”. The international development organisations instead constantly highlight that development NGOs lacked know-how and implementation capacities and how difficult it was to find qualified personnel. At the same time, people also complained that the approaches applied by international and national development organisations “do not fit with the local culture”. It has been, for example, criticised that NGOs act in rationalist, technocratic ways, without much political awareness. Likewise, one international organisation seemed to be unaware of the internal power struggles and co-opted controversial local NGOs. With regard to national NGOs, the major critique was directed against so-called micro-credit schemes. Apart from criticising the technocratic logic of micro-credits, indigenous activists mainly employed traditionalist arguments, rejecting micro-credit schemes as locally inappropriate. It has been argued that the market-oriented logic did not fit with the indigenous subsistence-based modes of production and resulting logics of economic action based on exchange.

Not only in the CHT but even more in the plains, indigenous people have been subject to Christianisation efforts since colonial times. The inter-linkages between development and

Christianity have been a persistent feature since missionaries have not only pursued education, but other standards of Western development. Two aspects which are interrelated shall be highlighted here. On the one hand, the attempts of Christian missions to convert indigenous people who believed in animism, have contributed to images of indigenous “backwardness” ever since the colonial period. The interrelation of Christianity and development (in the sense of modernisation) has certainly contributed to the popularisation of such images and to the degrading of ancient beliefs and lifestyles. Some missionaries for example prohibited the consumption of the local liquor and demonised local cultural practices and rituals. Analysing these interrelations reveals how different knowledge domains intersect and how they impinge on each other. On the other hand, while acknowledging development in this way, Christianity has also been looked upon as a kind of liberation and as a means to emancipation. In Mymensingh in the north, where Christian Garo and Muslim Bengali live next to each other, it becomes clear that institutions of religious education are very popular. Whereas many Muslim boys and girls receive education in the Madrasa, the Garo attend Christian (boarding) schools where Western education is practiced. In local everyday-life however, inter-religious interaction increasingly resembles global confrontations between Islam and the West. At the time, Christian missions (the local personnel of which usually belong to different ethnic groups including Bengalis) have discouraged indigenous activists from raising their voices. The disputed and fragile position of the Christian churches in this Muslim country has been problematic for many years and church representatives have been very conscious not to provoke opposition, fearing the outbreak of violence. This puts indigenous activism in the context of religion and development as it is negotiated at the national level. The emphasis on Islam in Bangladeshi nationalism which has determined the national political culture, has marginalised Christians. Christians have, in response, developed strategies to avoid confrontations. The indigenous movement challenges these practices and provokes the formation of different factions within the movement and reinforces the development of new strategies for negotiating indigenusness in the local as well as in the national context.

Dynamics of Ethnic-boundary Making

In Bangladesh, many of the indigenous groups and a handful Bengalis (academics, development organisations, state representatives) seek to represent the indigenous people in one way or the other. While these allies are considered as resources entailing a great deal of power and bargaining potential within the national context as well as beyond, there is also

strong opposition to their participation in the movement. To what extent can translocal networks connect and represent diverse and disparate indigenous groups? How do such networks reproduce historical power-hierarchies and patterns of ethnic domination? Under what conditions do indigenous activists co-opt ethnic “others”?

The indigenous population in Bangladesh is small, but highly diverse and marked by numerous fractions and frictions. It has been shown above, that one line of differentiation cutting through the movement relates to geographical concentrations, e.g. plains and CHT. This difference is of crucial importance for identity formation for a variety of reasons. One reason is the history of the regions and the way British colonialists categorised them gave way to a politics of inclusion and exclusion during the nation-building process under Pakistan’s rule and after Bangladesh’s independence in 1971. Another one is the way that indigenous populations have been dealt with in ethnographic writing during the last 120 years. Whereas the jumma of the CHT and the Garo enjoyed a comparatively comfortable status of having been confined to so-called “tribal areas”, other groups have been subject to attempts to incorporate them into Bengali mainstream society. Especially, the way that ethnographers have represented certain groups (especially in the CHT, which has attracted the attention of ethnographers for long time because of its extreme diversity) has considerably influenced their bargaining power within and beyond the nation-state. Although historical accounts (f.e. Francis Buchanan compiled by van Schendel) have highlighted the variability and flexibility of ethnic boundaries in the CHT, colonial categorisations (Lewin 1884, Hutchinson 1978) also defined ethnic identities in terms of clear-cut characteristics in essentialist ways. These categorisations have certainly contributed to a process of hardening of ethnic boundaries and the naturalising of them. What we can witness today is that the ways that representatives of the different groups relate to each other are characterised by these essentialist notions, sometimes glossing over similarities. These categorisations are accompanied by social inequalities between the groups in terms of developmental categories, such as access to health care, education and infrastructure. At the same time, language, religion and “culture” determine ethnic differences and contribute to boundary-drawing mechanisms preventing the formation of a unified movement. The Chakma for example, who form the majority of the Jumma living in the CHT and that constitute the most powerful group in terms of access to land, education and other resources, have been dominating the movement for self-determination both as militants during the war, but also as activists who have entered the global terrain. This has certainly antagonised other groups and resulted in conflicts which have been fought out along ethnic, but also along religious lines. Accordingly, we can witness the emergence of cleavages between the majority of Buddhists, to which the Chakma, but also Marma and some smaller groups belong, and

Christians, who have incorporated the minor groups and seek to represent their interests. However, these different coalitions are again shaped by internal differences which delimit the potentials to form a unified indigenous movement. Ethnic and religious boundaries, but also gender, socio-economic status, and access to national and global institutions produce conflicts within the movement. One particular challenge consists of the access to national and global decision-making processes and individual's power over the channels which are needed to communicate indigenous grievances. In a Santal village in Rajshahi, local leaders complained strongly about the indigenous representatives in national decision-making bodies. Also in other local settings, interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction with those allegedly representing them in globalised institutions such as the meetings of the UN Permanent Forum but who were regarded as having distanced themselves from the "community in favour of a cosmopolitan lifestyle in urban Dhaka. Moreover, the recognition of indigenous leaders who have become "global" perpetuates ethnic and socio-economic differences and tends to create even deeper cleavages.

Bengali activists and intellectuals have been engaged in representing indigenous lifestyles but also political claims. In recent years, Dhaka-based intellectuals including artists and academicians seek to create networks and form coalitions on behalf of indigenous groups. This kind of engagement has been interpreted in very ambivalent ways. On the one hand, it has been regarded as acts of solidarity. On the other hand, indigenous interviewees have said that they felt these attempts were exoticising and paternalist.

The historical accounts of the CHT clearly highlight that the different groups originate in various regions in South and South East Asia and connections to groups in other national contexts continue to exist (see van Schendel 1993; Löffler 1968). Especially neighbouring North-East India is inhabited by groups who share a number of cultural similarities and religious affiliations. These similarities have attracted some activist groups forcing the movement to look beyond Bangladesh's boundaries and to intensify contacts. One activist from Rangamati Hill Tracts for example reported that he and his colleagues invited a group of people from neighbouring Tripura to celebrate the Buddhist festival in April together and to exchange ideas about cultural similarities and differences. Likewise, Buddhist monks network with monasteries in Myanmar and Christian missionaries have maintained cross-border networks for a long time. But not only religious, but also intra-ethnic relations cross national boundaries. Borders created during decolonisation have cut through the territories inhabited by members of several ethnic groups. Garo, Tripura, Santal and others live on both sides of the border but maintain contact with each other through informal trade and (temporary) migration. While the Garo population in Bangladesh is rather small, the group inhabiting

Meghalaya is much bigger and is well represented in historical and ethnographic accounts (Bal 2007).

Conclusion

Indigenous movements in South Asia are engaged in struggles at different sites. These sites are located in translocal space. This concept offers a perspective which goes beyond the focus on transnational space because it highlights the various dimensions of interaction across symbolic and geographical boundaries. The Bangladeshi indigenous movement, a social phenomenon which has not gotten much attention yet, serves as an exemplary case to reveal how negotiations of indigenous activism take place at different levels and in different sites. The paper highlights three selected areas of investigation in order to depict the multiplicity of actors' perspectives, aims and rationalities within different actor constellations. First, it has been shown how global concepts are vernacularised and adapted under locally specific conditions which are, in the empirical cases described in this paper, mainly shaped by national politics. Secondly, investigating how different knowledge domains, e.g. indigeneity and development, intersect reveals how global and national development ideas shape the positioning of indigenous activism within the local and national realm, but also beyond. Third, local dynamics of ethnic boundary making which are, at the same time, determined by the representations of "foreign" ethnographers, reinforce the emergence of new constellations and coalitions which cross national boundaries.

The complex mechanisms within the national space may increase the significance of outside allies who are regarded as more trustworthy. But quite often, these are involved in complex constellations where different negotiations and processes take place rather simultaneously. This point particularly illustrates that the hierarchical logic of the local-national-(transnational)-global order does not count anymore. It may be the case that indigenous activists address potential allies who are situated differently within the space concerned without following a clear-cut agenda reflecting any kind of spatial order. Depending on the issue they are lobbying for, thus, the partners negotiated with, or the context of a specific event determines (e.g. international days) reveal how actors construct the local and the global. Taking into account that antagonistic relationships between indigenous people and the state may lead to a lack of identification with the national space, it may even make sense to question the national as a primacy reference for border-crossing dimensions. In many cases, there is empirical evidence that the notion of homeland, for example, does not apply to the country of origin but to the specific locality. Space, thus, is constructed always in relation to the actors' individual (or collective) rationalities with horizons sometimes being confined to, sometimes extending, local boundaries and national borders.

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