

Rural-urban migration and redefining indigeneity in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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This paper examines how students from indigenous groups from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Southeast Bangladesh who migrated to Dhaka navigate the city. It does so by investigating how students relate to discourses of modernity and urban lifestyles while not disregarding the importance of belonging to an indigenous group. This way challenging notions of being indigenous as related to a non-industrial mode of production and essentially rooted in rural areas. In addition, by revealing the ways in which these students redefine themselves as Bangladeshi, the dominant notion of a Bangladeshi as ethnic Bengali and Muslim are challenged since indigenous migrant students are neither ethnic Bengalis nor Muslims.

Keywords: Bangladesh, indigeneity, migration, Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Introduction

This paper illustrates how students from indigenous groups from the Chittagong Hill Tracts who migrated to Dhaka adapt to their new urban environment. To grasp the challenges for student migrants I first provide a background to the Chittagong Hill Tracts region and the problems of national integration of the region in Bangladesh. Afterwards I investigate the role of national and international indigenous people's discourses in the redefinition of indigeneity in the urban context of Dhaka and examine the influence of Bangladeshi nationalist discourses in this process. I do so by presenting ethnographic data from fieldwork in Dhaka during the first three months of 2012. Data will reveal how indigenous students relate to Bangladeshi middle class discourses that stress modernity and consumption, while at the same time not disregarding the importance of belonging to indigenous groups in Bangladesh. In documenting these social changes, this paper provides empirically grounded insights in social change and social mobility in contemporary Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi nationalism and the Chittagong Hill Tracts

The Chittagong Hill Tracts, or CHT as the region will be called henceforth, is an area in the Southeast of Bangladesh which is geographically isolated from the rest of the country. For many Bangladeshis the region functions as a reverse mirror image in Bangladesh; a marker of difference used to define Bangladeshiness by identifying those not considered Bangladeshi. As a result, ethnic and religious minorities living in the region are perceived as underdeveloped jungle people as in contrast to the Bangladeshi as developed and living on the Bengal plains. These images can largely be traced back to political developments and the ways in which Bangladeshi nationalism was constructed after its violent breakaway from West-Pakistan in 1971.

The Bangladeshi demand for independence from Pakistan was mainly a result of marginalization on ethnic and religious grounds by West-Pakistan (Mohsin 2002). Ethnic Bengalis living in East-Pakistan were discriminated in the Pakistani state between 1947 and 1971 on the basis of their ethnic belonging and their adherence to an interpretation of Islam seen as sanskriticized and

polluted by the West-Pakistani ruling elite. This led to a bloody war between Bangladeshi freedom fighters and the Pakistani army in which severe human rights violations occurred (Raghavan 2013). After independence was realized in 1971 the main marker of belonging to the new nation became being an ethnic Bengali. Which was partially a result of the discrimination of Bengalis within the Pakistani state and due to the fact that over 95% of the new country's population is an ethnic Bengali (Mohsin 2002). Although initially a secular state ideology was adopted (Van Schendel 2009, Haque Khondker 2010, Hassan 2011) soon, after a failed experiment with secularism, Islam became a more important marker for Bangladeshi identity when military regimes started to use the idioms of religion to create legitimacy for their rule and to distract attention from the way they monopolized power and looted public resources (Hashmi 2011: 28).

Both interpretations of being a Bangladeshi, whether emphasizing being an ethnic Bengali or being a Muslim, exclude ethnic and religious minority groups, such as indigenous groups living in the CHT, from the national imaginary of what it means to be Bangladeshi. This resulted in increased alienation of these groups from the nationalist project (Karim 1998, Mohsin 2002, Yasmin 2014). For indigenous groups from the CHT this alienation has been enhanced by a guerrilla war that broke out in 1975 between the PCJSS, a political and military organization representing sections of indigenous groups from the area, and the Bangladeshi army. In 1997 a peace accord was signed but the implementation of this accord largely failed due to a lack of lower level political support (Panday & Jamil 2009). As a result violence still erupts regularly throughout the region (Van Schendel 2009). The region's violent history and its people's antagonism towards Bangladesh in recent decades, as well as the emphasis on indigeneity and having a non-industrial mode of production, make the recent migration of these migrants to Dhaka remarkable. Even more so since Dhaka is the symbol of Bangladesh's rushed urbanization and its inclusion in the global economy making living in this megacity initially seem to contrast interpretations of indigeneity.

In the case of indigenous students, migration to Dhaka has increased particularly because of the increased integration of the CHT as part of the politics of centralisation that were set in motion in the Pakistani era (Van Schendel 1992). This centralization, which has further increased since the late 1990s, has resulted in a concentration of institutes for higher education in and around Dhaka, while the lack of institutes for higher education institutes in the CHT has remained. Another factor that has increased the number of student migrants are the quota for indigenous students at universities.

Indigeneity in Bangladesh

Apart from Bangladeshi nationalism the notion of indigeneity has significant impact as a marker of belonging for indigenous students from the CHT. This increasing relevance is part of a global trend in which in recent decades, hundreds of marginalized minorities have positioned themselves as indigenous peoples 'in order to access the rights and political spaces accorded to them by international rights law' (Jung 2008: 184). Problematic in claims of indigeneity is that they imply a relation between being indigenous and having a non-industrial mode of production (Eriksen 2002: 125), making essentialist associations between indigenous and living in a jungle easily made. In addition, indigenous claims are grounded in territories with references made to lands inhabited by people in the past and present (Karlsson 2003: 190). These claims resonate notions of rootedness in certain lands making demands of indigenous recognition, although effective in strengthening indigenous peoples' claims of access to space accorded to them by international law, fail in incorporating the increasing number of people that identify themselves as indigenous but have migrated to urban centres.

In Bangladesh, globalized indigenous politics have had a significant impact on demands of the national indigenous movement, providing additional legitimacy and an adaptation of the global language of indigeneity into local systems of meaning (Gerharz 2014: 565). These transna-

tional activist networks conceptualise indigeneity as constituting trans-local spaces while making use of essentialist categories. This way a broad group of actors draws on transnational indigenous people's discourses while representing, or claiming to represent, marginalized communities in Bangladesh. However the indigenous claim itself is much more than a participating tool, since it is "fundamentally concerned with culture and identity" (Kuper 2003: 207). This has led to discourses in which only certain cultural practises are celebrated in certain contexts to make them fit the claim of being indigenous as put forward by transnational activists' networks. As the following will illustrate, the increasing importance of indigeneity as a political tool as well as an identification marker has implications for how indigenous students in Dhaka relate to Bangladesh and navigate Dhaka

Methodology

For this study I did fieldwork in Dhaka during the first quarter of 2012, doing participant observation and taking 37 semi-structured interviews among indigenous students. During fieldwork I relied on translators who spoke Chakma, Bengali and English since I have only working knowledge of Bengali and did not speak Chakma, the most spoken language among indigenous inhabitants from the CHT. For all material presented in the upcoming sections explicit permission has been given by respondents to publish their stories. However to ensure anonymity respondents have been given fictitious names. Throughout the fieldwork a multi-stranded methodology approach has been adopted, focusing not on bounded fields but on shifting locations in line with the multiple entry points in respondents' lives. To this end I have done research in apartments, shopping malls and at universities, parks and temples.

Being a non-Bengali Bangladeshi

So far this paper has illustrated how indigenous groups from the Chittagong Hill Tracts have been alienated from the Bangladeshi nationalist

project and how the national and international indigenous people's discourses have provided access to rights and political spaces accorded to them by international rights law. Both these developments have had a significant impact on how indigenous student migrants relate to discourses of indigeneity and being Bangladeshi in the context of the mega city Dhaka. To illustrate this I now turn to the difficulties students faced when adapting to life in Dhaka since this involves a process of defining one's position in a new social context. Nearly all students I spoke to about their first period in the city explained how they had difficulties in expressing themselves and finding their place amongst others while constantly being referred to in racial stereotypes as a result of their Sino-Tibetan instead of Bengali appearance. Jash, a student at Dhaka University for example remembered

"What I really had problems with were the people here. When I first came here my classmates made fun of me because of how I look, how my nose and eyes are. They used to say I am from the jungle, primitive and so on. They called me 'Nak Chaptā' [flatnose] too. Now it is better, they know I am not like that but in the beginning it was bad"

For students this kind of racial stereotyping is challenging, not only because of the insults but also because it challenges their perception of themselves as Bangladeshis living in the nation's capital and engaging in its institutions. Abhik for example, a student in engineering living in Dhaka, explained:

"I have been raised here, I speak Bengali fluently, I had to work hard to do so since my parents who still live in Rangamati are not so good in Bengali, we spoke Chakma at home. But still they (Bengalis red.) will never see me as a Bangladeshi since I do not look like a Bengali. But I am a Bangladeshi and I have lived in this country all my life. So when they ask me where I am from I say I am from Bangladesh"

As well as being Bangladeshi, Abhik also prefers to stress that he is not 'from the jungle' and struggles with stereotypes associated with being

from the CHT, he explained:

“At first when I came here my classmates at the university asked if I ate frogs and snakes and if we run around naked all day. But now they know I am ok but we constantly have to proof it.”

As Abhik’s story illustrates, indigenous students in Dhaka feel a constant need to show how they are not ‘simple hill people’ but Bangladeshi students like their peers.

Modernity and indigeneity

To illustrate their similarity to peers, students often stress that they are modern while at the same time emphasising they are indigenous. By looking at how students refer to the CHT, which is for students closely related to being indigenous since it is the land the indigenous claim relates to, issues of modernity and indigeneity surface. Joshua, a student in economics told me the following about Banderban, the district in the CHT he is from:

“I am from Banderban and I am proud of this. I am proud of our culture. I am proud of being indigenous. They are my people, we have a good history”

While most students felt proud of being indigenous their migration to Dhaka led them to challenge the often taken for granted relation between being indigenous and having a non-industrial mode of production (cf. Eriksen 2002: 125). This way revealing the falseness of essentialist associations with indigenous peoples and the stereotypes associated with indigenous students in Dhaka. Monica, a female student, for example explained that she appreciated Dhaka because:

“Here I can buy things I cannot buy in the CHT, I can get a good education, I am in contact with the world, internet on my phone works, you have so many stores. That is not so where I grew up. I really feel like I am a city girl now.”

The access to communication technologies and

consumer goods as referred to by Monica does not exclude self-identification as indigenous despite the often emphasized link by students of indigenous as being rooted in the CHT. Rather, the indigenous peoples discourse allows indigenous students to redefine modernity in a way that does not exclude being indigenous. There is a negotiation and constant navigation to find a way to be modern *and* indigenous. Monica clarifies:

“If I will work at a bank when I am older and I travel to Europe, it does not change who I am. I do not become European, I do not become Bengali but still I will be indigenous to the CHT. I cannot change that. For example some Chakmas went to France a long time ago. They still live there, they were adopted at the time of the war. They are not the same any longer but they still come to the CHT because it is where they are from.”

The above illustrates how the notion of indigeneity put forward by national and international activist networks, as rooted in territories at the peripheries of nation states and linked to a non-industrial mode of production, does no longer hold for indigenous student migrants from the CHT. At the same time, students continue to emphasize indigeneity as an important category of belonging since it provides them with what the Bangladeshi nationalist project has failed to provide them: a meta narrative that helps in identifying one’s place in the world. In addition, the indigenous discourse is a way to articulate a connection to the CHT region, being the land their indigenous claim relates to, providing a sense of security and belonging that reconciles their separation from the area. This way the CHT and the notion of indigeneity are important signifiers of belonging linked to a place where one will always belong to, but which allows, or perhaps needs, negotiating between different forms of identity.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated how indigenous student migrants from the CHT adapt to their new urban environment in Dhaka and how the Bangladeshi nationalist project has alienated

ethnic and religious minorities from Bangladeshi nationalism that stressed being an ethnic Bengali and being Muslim. Migration by indigenous student migrants to Dhaka increases students engagement with mainstream Bangladesh, resulting in expressions of being Bangladeshi and setting in motion a process of redefining and challenging dominant notions of who is perceived a Bangladeshi and who is not. At the same time, indigenous students continue to emphasize the importance of being indigenous in an urban environment. This challenges notions of indigenous as essentially rooted in rural areas and as related to a non-industrial mode of production. Rather, students express being modern and being indigenous interchangeably, negotiating between different kinds of identities, discourses and positions.

AFTER COMPLETING a master in Social & Cultural Anthropology (MSc) at VU University Amsterdam in 2012, Jacco Visser enrolled in a second master's programme in Asian Studies at the Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies at Lund University. At present he is a second year student of the programme expecting to graduate in July 2015. Although broad, his main academic interests are Bangladesh, indigeneity, migration and diversity issues.

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