

Taking root in Bangladesh

Recently, a Garo friend of mine became a high-profile *adivasi* representative. He's considered by (non-Garo) donors, politicians, academics and media to be an important spokesperson for indigenous people(s) and is frequently consulted on a variety of 'indigenous' issues. When I visited Bangladesh last year, my friend and his wife asked me to stay with them. As a result of their generous offer, I gained unexpected insights into current changes concerning indigenous people's politics in Bangladesh, not least, how drastically the recently introduced international discourse on indigenous peoples has impacted identity formation amongst the Garos.

Ellen Bal

SIXTEEN YEARS OF EXPERIENCE among the Garos of Bangladesh have revealed to me how the worldwide debate on indigenous people has enabled not only the Garos but other ethnic minorities to take their place on the stage as more equal and respected citizens. However, my time with the Garos also taught me that indigenous identity representations do not quite concur with my findings as a historian, who wants to unravel the historical complexities of identity building by the Garo people. An incident which occurred in my friend's house so clearly illuminated the profound impact of 'indigenous peoples discourse' on notions of self and public representations of Garo history and traditions, amongst a new generation of young educated urban Garos.

Young urban traditions?

One morning, I had interviews lined up with a number of young staff members of my friend's small NGO. Most of them were Garo, two of them Chakma. Among the many things we discussed, we also talked about the photographs decorating one of the office walls. These portrayed a festive celebration of *wangala* (originally a Garo harvest festival) in a way I had not seen before. With the disappearance of the traditional *sangsarek* religion, *sangsarek* rituals had lost much of their relevance and appeal. Only in the 1990s, the Christian churches had revived the celebration of *wangala* in 'a Christian way', in order to bring Garos from different denominational backgrounds together, and to emphasise their distinct Garo cultural and religious (read: Christian) identity.

The photographs in the office, however, showed no overt signs of Christianity. I saw young women dressed in beautiful, recently designed Garo costumes, cheering at the launch of a sky lantern (a newly introduced element clearly inspired by Buddhist festivities). Some of the women wore jewellery, which I later learned had been collected by my friend during his trips to Thailand, India and The Philippines. Expats from Dhaka (representatives of the European Commission and various European embassies) cheerfully participated in dances and rituals, wearing curious hats and colourful 'tribal' make-up, as well as their ever present cameras. Yet, when I commented teasingly that these snapshots presented a wonderful example of the invention of tradition, one of the young staff members became upset and sternly informed me that I was looking at true Garo traditional culture. Missionaries had spoiled *wangala*, but their boss (my friend) had reintroduced original Garo culture. He had purified it of recent Christian influences, restored the authentic festival, and thereby also reduced the influence of church leaders, who had spoiled the festival in the first place. I realised at that moment how quickly and strongly the recent introduction of indigenous peoples discourse (with an emphasis on authentic indigenous culture) has influenced notions of Garo identity, culture and history. This young girl needed no exploration of 19th and 20th century history 'as it had been' but an assertion of Garo culture as truly indigenous.

The Garos of Bangladesh

At present, Garos constitute less than ten percent of the 'other peoples' of Bangladesh, an extremely marginal segment of just one percent of the total Bangladeshi population. Since the 1960s, Garos have begun migrating to cities such as

Mymensingh, Chittagong and in particular Dhaka in ever increasing numbers. They leave their villages to look for work or to follow higher education (at colleges and universities). Exact figures are not known but during my last visit I understood that ever increasing numbers of young people are leaving for Dhaka or other big cities, in search of jobs in domestic service, beauty parlours, or the garment industry. Each village that I visited had seen dozens of its young people leave. Villagers told me amusing stories about these migrants returning to their homes in the villages during Christmas holidays, with their trolley bags and mobile phones, as if they had come straight from Dubai.

Only a minority of Garos are citizens of Bangladesh. The large majority live in the Garo Hills in India (and the surrounding plains of Assam). An international border has separated the Bangladeshi Garos from the hill Garos since 1947. Partition resulted in a much stricter division than ever before. Although trans-boundary mobility has never stopped, Indian and Bangladeshi Garos increasingly developed in different directions. Bangladeshi Garos were more oriented towards Dhaka, influenced by Bengali language and culture, and obviously affected by the distinct political developments before and after the independence war of 1971. Nevertheless, differences between hill Garos and those from the Bengal plains have existed much longer. Already in 1901, Major Alan Playfair in his famous monograph on Garos separated 'those who inhabit the Garo Hills district, and those who reside in the plains and are scattered over a very wide area of country.'¹ At present, the segmentation into (Indian) hill Garos and (Bangladeshi) lowland Garos is also reflected in the names they give themselves. Bangladeshi Garos call themselves *Mandi*, which means 'human being'. They refer to the Garos from the Garo Hills as *Achik* ('hill person').

Indigenous people and the state of Bangladesh

For a long time the international discourse on indigenous people only marginally influenced minority issues in Bangladesh. At present however, 'indigenous peoples' or *adivasi*² issues not only figure prominently on the agendas and in the policies of donor agencies and NGOs, but have also become part of government policies in Bangladesh. Even the national Planning Commission has now included a separate section on 'tribal people' (TP) and 'tribal' issues in its report on poverty reduction (2005). The report states, for example, that '[o]ver the years the tribal people have been made to experience a strong sense of social, political and economic exclusion, lack of recognition, fear and insecurity, loss of cultural identity, and social oppression (...) TP are losing their own heritage, which threatens their sustainability.' Although the government of Bangladesh has not officially recognized its minorities as indigenous peoples, the Planning Commission does state that '[a] lesson can be learnt from the experiences of other nations that accommodate ethnic nationalities, for example China, India, Denmark, Norway, New Zealand, and Australia' (p.137).

The acknowledgement that 'tribal' minorities are in need of special attention on the basis of their distinctive cultures, experiences, socio-political circumstances, etc. is – unlike in India – a new development in Bangladesh. Despite some odd exceptions, the successive states of East Pakistan and Bangladesh have generally ignored, neglected, or (violently) excluded local 'tribal' minorities. The Partition of 1947 and the subsequent birth of Pakistan and India also marked the beginning of distinct political approaches on either side of the Indo-Pakistan border vis-à-vis 'tribal' minorities. In postcolonial India, special national and state policies were formalised in the Constitution to 'uplift' the backward tribes. Cultural and ethnic diversity were understood as prime features of the newly established Indian nation. The postcolonial state showed the same systematising urge that its colonial precursor had displayed. Although the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes already admitted in 1952 that no uniform test to classify the 'Scheduled Tribes' had been developed, an extensive list was prepared of all 'tribes'. The Garos of Meghalaya, India, are among these so-called Scheduled Tribes (ST).

Similar notions of diversity and multi-ethnicity have not developed in East Pakistan and Bangladesh. The citizens of these successive states were either conceived as Muslim or as Bengali. The successive states of Pakistan and Bangladesh never bothered to collect systematic information on the 'tribal' population. Nor did they develop formalised policies regarding 'backward' groups. The government of Bangladesh did not recognize their minorities as indigenous peoples and in 1993, the international year for the world's Indigenous People, the term 'indigenous peoples', was still fairly unknown in Bangladesh.

States, minorities and diversity

My first acquaintance with the Garos from Bangladesh dates back to November 1993.³ I had just commenced my project on the ethnicisation of community relations in Bangladesh and focused on the Garos as a case-study. At the time, Northeast India was off limits for foreigners, and a war was going on in the Chittagong Hill Tracts between the army and local minority communities. The Christian Garos seemed a 'suitable' community for my studies. My historical perspective allowed me to scrutinise how they had come to constitute the distinct ethnic community they are today. Available sources (unpublished and published

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Below:
Garo girl wearing a 'traditional' dress at the *Wangala* celebrations in Achkipara, Bangladesh. Photograph by IDPS, Indigenous Peoples Development Services.



Right:
Garo girls performing a 'traditional' dance at the *Wangala* celebrations in Achkipara, Bangladesh. Photograph by IDPS, Indigenous Peoples Development Services.

States, minorities, and discourses of citizenship



Above:
Garo girls posing for the photographer at the Wangala celebrations in Achkipara, Bangladesh. Photograph by IDPS, Indigenous Peoples Development Services.



Above:
European visitors at the Wangala celebrations in Achkipara, Bangladesh. Photograph by IDPS, Indigenous Peoples Development Services.



documents and oral history) revealed, among other things, the significance of the role of the successive states of British India, East Pakistan and Bangladesh in the complex and ongoing processes of identity formation and the articulation of Garo ethnicity in Bangladesh.

In *A recent history of Bangladesh* (2009), Willem van Schendel provides an elaborate account of the historical and contemporary complexities of national identity formation processes in Bangladesh (and previously in East Bengal and East Pakistan).⁴ He points to the paradoxical relation between two dominant and competing models for identification: the Bengali and the Muslim identity. The shared Muslim identity stood at the basis of independent Pakistan, free from British domination, and different from Hindu-dominated India. The Bengali identity gained momentum in the struggle against West Pakistani domination. Garos and many other Bangladeshis do not adhere to these competing identifications. These non-Bengali, non-Muslim Bangladeshis – roughly estimated at one per cent of the total population – are neither Muslim nor Bengali, and they have always remained, to some extent, excluded from mainstream society. I could present several instances of the states of Pakistan and Bangladesh excluding Garos from equal participation as full-fledged citizens.

One extreme example is their flight from East Pakistan in 1964. Within a time span of only a few weeks, thousands of Garos fled across the border into India, since the government (knowingly) failed to protect them against the mass influx of local Muslim settlers and refugees from Assam. Their flight was not merely a result of this sudden immigration of thousands of land-hungry settlers (supported by local police and the East Pakistan Rifles), but also caused by a lingering sense of insecurity among these Garos ever since the birth of East Pakistan. This experience only intensified the feelings of insecurity among those who eventually returned, for many years to come. I heard many stories about people refraining from planting new trees, for example, afraid these investments would go waste if they had to flee again.

Bangladesh for Bengalis

The birth of Bangladesh in 1971, the attitude of state leaders at the time, and the ensuing politics and practices also present a striking example of how state and identity formation can be interconnected.

After East Pakistan's Sheikh Mujibur Rahman won the elections that would have made him prime minister of Pakistan, the Pakistani army came into action. On the night of March 26, 1971, a nine-month war began in which between three hundred thousand and one million East Pakistanis died. Within two to three months after the outbreak of the liberation struggle, the border area and home to the lowland Garos had turned into a war zone. Garos (and this time also their Bengali neighbours) fled to the camps in India on the other side of the border. Already at the very beginning of the war, the government-in-exile approached the Garos to join the Freedom Fighters and many young Garos joined the *Mukti Bahini* (Liberation Force). One informant told me about their excitement and hope for a better future:

"We wanted an independent country. We had been exploited by the Pakistanis. We wanted to live in this country with the dignity of citizens of a free country. In those days they [Pakistanis] did not recruit the adivasis ['tribals'] in their army or in the police force; they totally ignored the adivasis. Another thing was that we wanted to prove our feelings for the country, that we also loved this country. We wanted to show that we were also citizens of this country."

When, in December 1971, the Indian army administered the final blow to the Pakistanis and Bangladesh became an independent country, many Garo refugees were eager to return to their villages and to a new country that held the promise of a better future.

Nevertheless, it soon became clear that Sheikh Mujib favoured a democratic country on the basis of secular principles and the ethnic Bengali identity, and had no intentions of turning Bangladesh – either officially or ideologically – into a multi-ethnic country. In 1972, a Chakma delegation met Mujib to discuss the demands of the inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Their demands included autonomy and a special legislature for the Hill Tracts. Mujib simply refused to accept any of the demands of the hill people and 'angrily threatened to drown the tribals in a flood of people from the plains...'⁵ During a visit to Rangamati in 1975, Sheikh Mujib addressed the crowd as brethren. He told them to become Bengalis, suggesting they forget the colonial past, and asked them to join mainstream Bengali culture. The crowd then left the scene, to which Sheikh Mujib responded with the threat to send the army and Bengali settlers into the hills.⁶

While the Garos never experienced the same situation of repression and warfare that was inflicted on the hill people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the period after 1975, they did learn about Sheikh Mujib's attitude towards the ethnic minorities. One of my Garo informants reported the following:

"Again we came back. There was no rehabilitation programme of the government. Only Caritas and some other organisations helped the people. Some Garos went to see Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. They told him: 'We are tribals so we need special care from the government.' They presented him millam-spie [Garo shield and sword] as a souvenir. Sheik Mujib said to them: 'All people here are Bengali.' The Garos told him that they needed special protection, but he refused. He told us that we are Bengalis, and said 'You do not need any special privileges.'"

Two years later, in 1973, Sheikh Mujib stated that the ethnic minorities would be promoted to the status of Bengali, and in 1974, Parliament passed a bill that declared Bangladesh as a 'uni-cultural and uni-linguistic nation-state'.

During the first years after independence, Garos found themselves urged by the state leaders to unite as Bengalis, and after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, again as Muslims. Yet they firmly rejected both identities and instead emphasised counter discourses in which they presented themselves as Bangladeshi Garos and Christians. In the process they further unified as a distinct ethnic community in Bangladesh, different from Bengali Muslims/Muslim Bengalis, but more strongly rooted than before in Bangladesh; the country which they now claimed as their motherland, despite the fact that the motherland still had not accepted them on their own terms.

Epilogue: taking root as Garos of Bangladesh

During my last visit, in April 2009, I witnessed a new step in this process of taking (and claiming) root. The Garos have firmly embraced the discourse of indigenous peoples and indigeneity to emphasise their belonging to the country, while pointing at the specific problems and challenges they as an indigenous community are still facing (and share with other indigenous communities). The Awami League (considered a pro-*adivasi* party) in power and indigenous people's issues firmly on the donors' agendas are clearly to the advantage of this process of empowerment and emancipation. The indigenous or *adivasi* discourse unites Garos with other minorities inside and also across the Bangladesh borders and inspires the Garos to reassert their distinct identity as Garos and *adivasis*.

In order to assert their indigenous identity, Garos are carefully turning to the Garo Hills in India, the cradle of 'authentic Garo culture'. They brush aside the fact that they never formed a homogenous community with a single culture and language, and rather emphasise the similarities and uncritically rely on studies of the language, culture, and history of hill Garos. In their process to unite with other *adivasis*, they stress their common (historical) experiences with human rights violation, land grabbing by Bengali settlers, and forceful expulsion from their lands, and discard the many differences they faced and are still facing.

It can be argued that the experiences of the Garos of East Pakistan/Bangladesh are marked by at least three different, albeit somewhat overlapping phases, during which these Garos from the Bengal delta adopted and/or emphasised different identity markers setting them apart from the dominant Muslim/Bengali population of the country. Of late, the Garos of Bangladesh have embraced the label of indigenous peoples, uniting them inside and across borders, with Garos and other 'tribal' minorities, and encouraging them to invent themselves as authentic, indigenous (hence culturally distinct), people of Bangladesh. This process in which they assert (and invent) their indigenous and Bangladeshi identity may not exactly coincide with the historian's ambition to reveal 'historical complexities and fragmentations', but at this very moment it seems to offer new roads to becoming full-fledged citizens on terms that have already entered state policies.

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Notes

1. Playfair, Alan [1909] 1975. *The Garos*. Gauhati and Calcutta: United Publishers, p. 59.
2. Unlike in India, where the local term *adivasi* was introduced many decades ago and long before the United Nations declared 1993 as 'the international year for the world's Indigenous People', in Bangladesh, *adivasis* and Indigenous People(s) are synonymous with one another.
3. See Bal, Ellen 2007. *They ask if we eat frogs': Garo ethnicity in Bangladesh*, Singapore, Leiden: ISEAS/IIAS.
4. van Schendel, Willem 2009. *A History of Bangladesh*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Talukdar, Sakya Prasad 1988. *The Chakmas. Life and Struggle*. New Delhi: Gian Publishing House, pp. 50-51.
6. Chakma, A. B. 1984. Look Back from Exile. A Chakma Experience. In Wolfgang Mey (ed.), *They are Now Burning Village after Village: Genocide in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*. Copenhagen: IWGIA, pp. 58-59.