

**Indigenous Peoples' Organizations, Alternative Income  
Generation, and the Wangala Festival: Engagements of  
Indigenous Environmentalism in Modhupur**

American Institute of Bangladeshi Studies

Final Report

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## Introduction

My initial proposal for research under an AIBS fellowship was to study cultural/environmental hybrid tourism in the Bandarban region of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. While I had made several scouting visits to Bandarban and surrounding areas, had contacts in the tourism industry there, and preliminary research was underway, a variety of factors caused me to shift location. These included the difficulty of travelling back and forth from resources and family in Dhaka to Bandarban, constant suspicion and questioning phone calls by Bandarban police and military, and an exceptional opportunity for research in another location.

That other location was the Modhupur forest area in Tangail, with which I was familiar but had not yet spent much time. The founder of an organization called SEMP (Society for Environment and Medicinal Plants) generously offered to acquaint me with the area, helped me to arrange accommodations, and introduced me to local leaders. The finding of the Modhupur site and the welcome received was certainly an unexpected opportunity on a grand scale within my research.

Every day of ethnography, I tried to make myself as available as possible to potential unexpected events, which often become some of the most compelling pieces of ethnographic data. A purveyor of Mandi cultural artifacts might have just gotten engaged, and I would head off to informally interview him; some staff of an *adivasi*-rights organization might be on their way to a conference on land claims and I would catch the bus with them immediately; local farmers may have gathered in unrest about the training and loans they were promised by the forest department and I would be there; and local Mandi (Garo) villagers may have tied up a forest patrol worker for preventing them from selling trees, and I would immediately hire a motorbike. Unexpected events are an inherent and important part of ethnography, and everything is an opportunity. This also includes mundane conversation and everyday life which, together with more singular events, come to comprise an ethnography.

The majority of the fellowship period I spent between Modhupur and Dhaka, traveling back and forth every other week. In Dhaka, I attended conferences and lectures on environmental and *adivasi* issues, conducted background research via archives and libraries, transcribed interviews, and formulated follow-ups and new research strategies. I also conducted ethnographic research among Mandi migrants to Dhaka, particularly via the Nokmandi Garo Community Center in Dhaka. In Modhupur, I conducted extensive ethnographic study, involving innumerable interviews, conversations, and events surrounding my research themes.

## Research background

Where I intend for my research to fit into the field of Bangladesh Studies is to attempt to address some rather broad and notable gaps. One of these is in the field of environmental studies of Bangladesh. While there is much in the way of scientific study of climate change, policy papers, and development work, there is not enough work asking what environment or environmentalism mean and can mean for Bangladeshi people themselves, on a discursive, cultural, or everyday level. Another lack I see is in addressing adivasi concerns beyond a human rights and land rights paradigm. The “indigenous question” in Bangladesh does share some similarities with India, other locations in Asia, and even some global perspectives can. However, with the exception of a few scholars and advocates, the current mode in which indigenous issues are talked about does not go far enough in addressing the local and national particularities of what indigeneity does or could mean.

Finally, there is a notable gap in theoretically-informed and academically-oriented critiques of development paradigms in Bangladesh. Critiques tend to fall along the lines of policy suggestions, which are indeed a very valuable contribution. However, what also is called for is study of what are the particular contours of development *work* in Bangladesh as it stands today. Bangladesh provides a unique environment for engaging key questions about poverty and poverty-alleviation in the contemporary world, particularly in being so immersed in micro-credit and related paradigms. What is under-studied is the culture of these spaces – what is actually going on and being replicated, and what are the local stakes in these often glossed-over spaces of “the NGO”. In global development discourse, and in Bangladesh’s in particular, there is often an assumption about what a “local NGO” means or “accountability” means, without any kind of thorough, on-the-ground engagement with the actualities and everyday banalities of NGO work.

## Goals and obstacles

While, as noted earlier, I shifted my research area and somewhat my research subject, I was definitely able to complete my goals of conducting a thorough ethnographic study of my subject matter. That is, the complex interactions between globalized notions of environmentalism and indigeneity as they become localized in locations in Bangladesh, primarily through NGO work and tourism.

A primary but overcome obstacle was my experience with police and military in Bandarban which prompted my shift of research site. What also became an obstacle at times is the politics of doing ethnographic research. Modhupur is, in geographical and population terms, a small place, but one with a turbulent recent history, and one in which many interests are invested – those of recent poor Bengali migrants trying to eke out a living, wealthy Bengali families capitalizing on cheap labor and land, the air force who has an important facility there, the forest department, local politicians, and of course, the NGO workers and Mandi population who were my main friends, informants, and generous research subjects. This commingling of intense and often conflicting interests is part of what makes the Modhupur site so important and valuable to me, but occasionally engendered varying suspicions of what my activities and true motives were in conducting such intimate research. I managed to, for the most part, stay clear of the fray of competing political interests, and only severed a few connections along the way.

Another obstacle was the difficulty of finding reliable census and historical information in some cases. I plan to fill in gaps as best I can through further archival research, but it is partly these gaps that allow for the contingencies of culture and conflict. Therefore, while anthropology must undoubtedly be historically informed, my goal in research is to paint a portrait of communities and social processes as they I see them in this particular context, including contested histories and gaps in information rather than trace every element of “fact” to relay a truth of events.

## Archives and institutions

While my research is not primarily archival, I spent several weeks accessing records in the National Archives, primarily census data and correspondences about the Mandi and Modhupur from the twentieth century. I also spent time looking at newspaper archives in the adjoining national library. While I accessed many small library collections and records from non-governmental organizations, the collections I owe a particular debt to include those of SEHD (Society for Environment and Human Development), BELA (Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association), JAUP (*Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnoyon Porishod*), and the Catholic Mission in Pargacha.

I attended conferences at BRAC and at Independent University Bangladesh, as well as several hosted by Oxfam and its affiliates. My main institutional connections were with SEHD, SEMP (Society for Environment and Medicinal Plants), JAUP, and the Pargacha mission, but I also worked with more smaller NGOs and NGO branches than I can possibly mention.

SEHD is an organization with which I have worked several times over the years. They have helped me to some degree to narrow down what might be effective avenues of research and informed me of the major players in areas in which I was interested. They also offered their library, office space, and other resources to use. Part of my ethnography has been about SEHD itself, and the culture of NGO work at SEHD in helping to shape the discourse of adivasi hood and environmentalism through its works and publications.

SEMP, primarily its founder and director, was instrumental in carrying out my work. As many good ethnographic informants, SEMP's director served as friend, subject, guide, negotiator, and all-around great resource for carrying out my research. Introductions to important community members in Modhupur was one of the most valuable aspects of this. While I was careful to note that I do not do development work, I did offer informed and, I hope, valuable advice as a trusted friend and colleague in exchange.

JAUP, thought of as one of the primary public "voices" of the Mandi of Modhupur, was invaluable to me as well. This was a collaboration in which I did far more listening than speaking, as the organization welcomed me into the community and into the way their organization works. Finally, the Pargacha mission was primarily a place at which I lived for five weeks of my research, but also offered their library, census data, and lots of interesting and heated conversation about the history and politics of the area.

## Method

I continued pursuing the question of the indigenous/environmentalist nexus in Modhupur, which has an absorbing history of local Garo/Mandi resistance to tourism and other interventions in the forest. I recorded hundreds of interviews, which focused on my interests (conceptions of nature, ethnicity, and NGO activities) but which I kept open-ended to gather what was most important to my friends and informants. Issues that surfaced again and again in these conversations were endlessly compelling to an anthropologist: dispossession of land via ambiguities of autochthony, law, and power; contests over the meanings and value of “culture” and language and their place in politics; urban migration as a threat to community; and contestation over gender roles as related to religion, migration, and shifts from agricultural to service labor.

The bulk of the ethnographic research I conducted in the Modhupur forest area consisted of interviews and conversations with local Mandis, including leaders and particularly NGO workers, primarily focused around a few central themes. The major thematics of my research are the ways in which international discourses about indigeneity and environmentalism coalesce in the Modhupur locale – how are these discourses contested, rejected, reshaped, or accepted and what changes to subjectivities are engendered by those engagements. The ways in which these play out in particular in Modhupur are primarily through IPAC and Forest Department (as well as smaller NGO) attempts to deploy them, in protected areas, parks, and tourism; in ideas about alternative income generation; and in NGO development and rights work. However, several independently strong but related themes emerged which I also pursued as lines of inquiry about the Modhupur area, and which have since served as the bases for individual dissertation chapter/articles – 1) How do NGOs function in identity production? This is twofold, both in the constitution of an NGO subject (urban, professional, cosmopolitan) and in the constitution of a Garo/Mandi subject (indigenous, Christian, educated, environmental, minority). 2) What are the gendered dimensions of recent changes in urban labor, communication technology, and education among the Mandi? More specifically, what are the effects of the shift away from matrilineal and matrilineal practices associated with these changes, and with increased contact with Bengalis? 3) How are “co-management” and other buzz-words related to localism and participation being deployed in Modhupur? 4) Are neoliberal, participatory models of development like “alternative income generation” reshaping ways of doing business, subjectivities, or being used strategically to meet existing ways of doing things? 5) To what extent is NGO work a form of affective labor, a way of being, a way of pre-cognitive affect?

During my stay in Modhupur, I spent time living with three different families, and also at a Catholic mission, while often tacking back to Dhaka. In addition to participant observation at the four villages in which I resided and the non-governmental organizations in Modhupur and in Dhaka which were a key object of study, I did extensive recording (audio, some video and photo, and of course note-taking) of Wangala harvest festivals of several varieties in different contexts. My dissertation writing, based primarily on this research, is organized under the following wide-ranging headings: Identity Maintenance Work at IPOs (Indigenous Peoples' Organizations); Gender, Urban Labor, and Changing Dimensions of Matrilineality; Pro-Localism and the Participatory Approach in Indigenous Forest Management; Local Neoliberalism in AIG (Alternative Income Generation); and Affective Labor in the Indigenous-Environment Nexus. Whether all of the material I collected will fit into one cohesive dissertation, or whether some will be saved for future publications remains to be seen.

### **Dissertation outline**

Environmentalism aspirations and adivasi cultural and land rights aspirations have long had a strong link in Bangladeshi civil society. In my dissertation, I look at the role played by IPO's in negotiating with government via these internationalized discourses but in local spaces. IPO leaders are skilled interlocutors who have to answer primarily to an international donor community, but also to the local people they are ostensibly representing.

I introduce JAUP, a locally-based Indigenous Peoples' organization working in the Modhupur Forest Area, and detail the way the organization serves the community, primarily as a de facto leadership for the sizable number of Mandi living in the Modhupur area and as producing and reproducing a particular brand of representation to the outside community. This involves a familiar (due to its connections to transnational indigeneity) often depoliticized indigeneity which serves multiple ends: opportunity for celebration of "Mandi culture", music, ritual, and dance; ritual and forms which are on one hand palatable to a Bengali and an international audience and on the other sensualized, exotic, and intriguing; and the reinforcement of a teleological understanding of indigeneity which retains those "past" (cultural) elements while offering a potential mainstreamed, modern future.

I focus on their positioning within the fields of transnational indigeneity as a form and local and regional politics of adivasiness. How this functions at the local level through fairs and festivals, as well as resistance to the Forest Department, exemplifies many familiar themes of indigeneity. However, I try to

answer the call of Ghosh (2010) and others to interrogate the constant teleological references in understanding indigeneity (as he points out, even implicit in the formulation “indigenous but modern”) and point to an example of how narratives of modernity and progress, even when caged as environmental preservation, run up against a still-not-fully-recognized subversive potential engendered by adivasi politics.

As a second major theme, I look at “Alternative income generation” (AIG) or sometimes, “enterprise development”, currently a primary goal of development work in the Modhupur Forest Area of Tangail. Championing neoliberal models of entrepreneurship, AIG is a catch-all phrase for the ongoing efforts to incorporate otherwise “unproductive” or “counter-productive” bodies into capitalist enterprise. What the current forest labor (small-scale tree-felling and other forest produce collection) represents in this model is particularly unproductive labor, though the forest itself also offers potential for more “modern” forest usage in the form of affective revenues as tourism. The encouragement of AIG in forest areas capitalizes on environmental concerns by arguing that by encouraging “eco-friendly” enterprises instead of forest dependency, the wilderness can be saved (or put to more efficient use). AIG programs in forest areas are often coupled with “ecological education” initiatives regarding climate change, biodiversity, and their link to natural disaster.

AIG takes up many of the ideas of the extremely widespread “micro-credit” programs in Bangladesh, while leaving other aspects aside. “Micro-credit” generally refers to small-scale lending to groups (often women) at high interest with the idea that those groups will become entrepreneurs. AIG takes up the entrepreneurship model, focuses on “training”, and leaves out the high-interest loans. With increasing skepticism if not outright hostility toward micro-credit programs (touted to Western donor countries as the most effective means of poverty alleviation ever devised) in Bangladesh, any type of lending scheme is often suspect.

Micro-credit schemes are not the only NGO activities under suspicion at the local level, however. NGOs must perform a constant balancing act in order to maintain credibility which, in many cases, has little to do with their efficacy, but much to do with how well they can maintain their image in a climate of suspicion. On one hand, an NGO which is economically self-sufficient the charge of “He’s making profit” or “He’s making business”. On the other hand, an NGO which is not self-sufficient but is receiving a significant stream of funding from abroad, while gaining legitimacy by it, is also under a suspicion that they are merely in the pocket of donors. Both the “he’s making profit” charge and the charge of being in league with malevolent outsiders carry heavy mystical connotations, often to the

extent of “evil-doing”. I focus primarily on two disparate types of NGOs working in Modhupur, both working on forms of AIG, and both coming under enormous suspicion by locals in their activities. One is extremely small (one person) and with little funding, while the other is an arm of one of the largest environmental NGOs in Bangladesh, and is funded via USAID channels.

In addition to my analysis of AIG, I detail the ways in which both of my NGO examples, small-scale and large-scale, using ideas about the appropriateness and efficacy of entrepreneurship, became frustrated with the ways in which capitalist enterprise was “misunderstood” by locals and perceptions of “time” as related to productivity were mismatched between project managers and locals. Often, this mismatch was interpreted by project managers (etically) and locals (emically) as laziness, and was also often viewed in terms of gender. The widespread idea that Garo women are laborious, while Garo men are slothful, and that this is directly related to (inappropriate, matriarchal) gender roles in the Garo community is detailed. I conclude with a brief analysis of the role that alcohol plays in the discourse about male Garo laziness, along with some other comments about its role in Garo internal debate about what constitutes Garo tradition and what constitutes Garo modernity, tacking back to the introduction of this in an earlier chapter. I tie this back to varied Garo acceptances and rejections of AIG programs as related to tradition/modernity and laziness/productivity debates.

### **Presentations and publication**

Unfortunately, I was forced to return to the U.S. due to a family emergency, and was not able to conduct a lecture at the Dhaka Center. However, I was able to give a presentation at the American Center in Dhaka just prior to the start of the AIBS fellowship, which was attended by about twenty people and was entitled “*Gram, Sohor, Jongol, and the Deployment of Environmentalism*”. In my work with Society for Environment and Human Development, I wrote several articles, including a critical review of Masanobu Fukuoka’s *One-Straw Revolution*, an article on present-day Marma life, and an article on *adivasi* languages. The latter was published in the volume *Survival on the Fringe* and mentioned in the Daily Star. I plan to defend my dissertation in May of 2013 and to submit one or more dissertation chapters as articles for publication prior to that. I would welcome the opportunity to present some of my material at the AIBS center in Dhaka during a future visit, or at another AIBS function.