

## *Adivasi* Status: Reflection from the Ethnic Voices

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to reveal out the rights and demands of the ethnic people of Bangladesh throughout *Adivasi* status. Eventually, focuses their reaction regarding identity crisis by termed them subnational unit. This paper is based on the study conducted among the university students of different ethnic groups in the Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University, Gopalganj, Bangladesh. The respondents were selected randomly. The term does not focus on the geographical location of a specific community; it is a self-designation and prestigious nominal identity. In the Indian Subcontinent, *Adivasi* are considered as the original inhabitants. There is a debate between major and minor groups. In Bangladesh, sometimes the word is used for the past inhabitants of Chittagong hill tracts and other parts of Bangladesh who are usually well known as ethnic minorities. The debate is a political issue and becoming popular throughout media visibility. Different terms are used to introduce ethnic groups of Bangladesh since independence. Earlier they were known as ‘*upajati*’, in the 1990s and early 2000s they were highlighted as ‘*Adivasi*’, and lastly, since the 15th amendment in 2011 they were introduced constitutionally as *khudro nrigosthi*. This has been making an obscurity and identity crisis among these groups. The respondents claimed that the force settlement and demolish ethnic land right have been continued rather giving *Adivasi* status, and the military rule has been continuing by the name of development. ILO Convention should be imposed strictly for their actual betterment. They expect a separate identity. They have confused whether they will get the privileges like the mainstream population after getting the status or not, they think this identity will give them prestige. They become confused and find out some reasons for not giving the recognition.

**Keywords:** *Adivasi*, Identity, Rights, Politics.

### 1. Introduction

*Adivasi* refers to the original inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent. But, India does not recognize these groups as indigenous. Though India ratified International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 107, the country refused to sign ILO Convention 169. In 1930, this term was coined by a political activist to give a differentiated indigenous identity to tribal people. In Hindi and Bengali, *Adivasi* means ‘original inhabitants’ and it is an identity that gives self-designation. ‘*Adivasi*’ is the collective term that is used for the ‘tribal’ people of the Indian Subcontinent. These people are considered indigenous.

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'*Adivasi*' is an identity; it's not a term only. In this paper, the term has been used for the inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other parts in Bangladesh. These people demand the '*Adivasi*' as their identity and 'indigenous' as its translation. Though there is confusion worldwide regarding indigenous, aboriginal, and ethnic status. Since the 15th amendment in 2011, distinct ethnic identities were mentioned. But only their cultural aspects were mentioned whereas major issues related to economic, political and land rights remain ignored. In that amendment, it was said that the people of this country would be recognized as Bengali and citizens would be termed as Bangladeshi. People who are not Bengali would be recognized as '*khudro nrigosthi*'. The ethnic communities could not accept it and started to face an identity crisis again. They asked for their rights within the state structure.

Many writers and intellectuals in civil society address them as *Adivasi* in this country though the government of Bangladesh and major Bengalese usually do not recognize it. Bangladesh's government recognizes them in different terms at different times. This recognition creates an identity crisis among the ethnic people that it makes them frustrated. They cannot find out why government introduces them to such a kind of terminology (*Upajati*, *Khudro Nrigosthi*) rather *Adivasi*.

On the other hand, it is said that indigenous, aboriginal, native, ethnic concepts are getting fuel from the post-development period. Development organizations have been running development projects for the betterment of the backward. After Second World War, development agencies targeted some groups and tried to make them privileged. According to this policy, these groups have been trying to be highlighted through these conceptions. In 1980s-90s, the term 'indigenous' became popular worldwide. Ethnic minor groups demanded their identity as indigenous. In Bangladesh, same situation occurred and in the 90s ethnic minor groups demanded the status of indigenous and *Adivasi* instead of *upajati*. It's a puzzle whether of politics of identity or politics of development agencies to capture the geopolitics.

## **2. Statement of the problem**

The term ethnicity indicates a group that is considered as minor or racial minority though social anthropology gives us another overview. According to social anthropology, ethnicity refers to a group that regards itself as culturally distinctive. But ethnicity has a discursive formation that tends to concern itself as a subnational unit, minority or else. Thomas Hyland Eriksen (1993) said that dominant groups or majorities are no less 'ethnic' than minorities. Despite that, these people always face nationality and identity crises. 'Tribe', 'race', 'caste', 'ethnic group', and 'nation' are now used to represent ethnicity at different levels (Horowitz, 1985). Indeed as the notion of ethnicity expands in the public and academic discourse, it has become "a way to signal any category of group identity even gender" (Tilley 1997: 496-522).

Williams (1989) emphasizes ethnicity can only be understood in relation to the state and to the question of nationhood. William noted that ethnic groups in a

society do not exist in isolation, instead, they are overlapping groupings whose relationships are defined, not by their relative power or status in comparison to one another, but by their position within the state (1989: 407-8). Marxists Mamdani (1976) and Hechter (1975) argued that ethnicity does not arise due to socio-cultural differences; rather it is a consequence of state economic development policy and legal frameworks. It constructs the social relationship into 'core' and 'periphery'.

In the twentieth century, it was thought that ethnicity and nationalism would lose their importance due to modernization, industrialization and individualism. Contrary it had gained political and academic importance as well. Eriksen (1993) showed us that there were happened thirty-five or thirty-seven armed conflicts in 1991. Most of them were ethnic conflicts and they demanded national identity being separated from former colonies. The Soviet Union had split different ethnic nationalities. On the other hand, in Europe and North America, different ethnic groups demand their national identity and lead their ethnic parliament. So, it is clear that ethnic people always face identity crises and fought for nationality over the century.

The government of Bangladesh addressed the indigenous (synonym of ethnic group) people of this country by different terms (Atiqur Rahman, 2013). These terms make disagreement between government officials and indigenous peoples. They were introduced as '*upajati*' (subnation), they rejected this term and demanded *Adivasi* recognition in Bengali and indigenous in English. According to them, *upajati* term is associated with 'backwardness' and 'primitiveness'. Peter J. Bertocci studied in CHT area and wrote Chittagong Hill Tribes of Bangladesh (1984). He mainly focused on the social and economic domination of these groups. The relation between Bengali and ethnic people is always bitter and Bengali have strong control over the trade market of this area. Due to the rapid migration process, these people become more marginal. Similarly, military rule, Kaptai dam, forest reservation, etc. make them more vulnerable where land use, ownership, settlement, regional autonomy is a valid question. The ethnic people of Bangladesh want these rights through *Adivasi* status. This research mainly focuses on this issue.

### 3. Identity Politics: Life against Mainstream

Identity refers to the existence of individuals. Identity crises could be created by marginal position like sex, ethnicity, nationality, religion and so on. The identity crises and politics regarding the ethnic people of Bangladesh have been changed over time which made them disappointed. They demand the '*Adivasi*' term which is a political and debating issue for not giving their expected status though they belong there.

Many literatures attempt to conceptualize ethnicity as a product of colonialism. Therefore, ethnic identities have not been created solely by colonialism. The ethnic discourses are to be formulated with regard to the 'others'. Both colonial and post-colonial realities are the catalyst for the significant 'other' in present day identity construction in the CHT (Ahmed, 2014).

He added that the state constructs Bengali society and 'tribal' people as having distinctive and oppositional identities. Under the colonial period, 'tribal' people were constructed as primitive. This also continued in post-independent Bangladesh. The state categorized 'upazati' (subnation) which followed the 'tribal' reality.

Baviskar (2003) focused politics of culture and argued that groups construct and reconstruct identities for themselves in their struggle and negotiations with dominant groups and the state leads us to explore other issues related to it. A number of anthropologists (Conklin 2002; Winzeler 1997) have explored this complex politics of cultural identity, images and representation involved when indigenous groups nationally and internationally manipulate, project, and homogenize their public images and identities in order to seek recognition and demand rights.

The term identity politics was first introduced by black feminist Barbara Smith in her edited book *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983). Identity politics means a wide range of political activities and theoretical analyses which has been rooted in various experiences of injustice. Basically, these experiences are shared by different minority groups who are treated as excluded social groups. In this perspective, identity politics objects to regain self-determination and political liberty for marginalized peoples through considering particular instances and lifestyle factors. It also challenges external characteristics and limitations.

Smith (1983) argued that identity politics is connected to the social groups who are being oppressed continuously. She mentioned that women, sexual and ethnic minorities are more vulnerable position regarding their identity by the virtue of nature. After birth, girls need to think them different being being treated differently from boys. Similarly, blacks are not like white-based on race. By this process of conscious raising and life sharing, a commonality of experiences has been observed. This experience and sharing produce a politics that changes lives and reduce oppression. In the United States, identity politics is ascribed to those small groups who are fighting against discrimination to establish their rights. In Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, identity crisis has described violent nationalist and ethnic conflicts. In Canada and Spain, identity politics is used to describing the separatist movement. Escobar (1992) analyzed the term 'cultural struggle' and argued that people come into conflict dominant cultural order being marginalized over time.

In the writing 'Tribal Peoples, Nationalism and the Human Rights Challenge: The *Adivasi* of Bangladesh' (2005), Tone Bleie described the ethnic situation of the South-Asian subcontinent especially focused on Bangladesh. Despite the history of Bengali earliest inhabitants, they are not recognized properly. They have contributed during mass rebellions and nationalist movements. Now, their human rights and livelihood are in crisis because of massive loss of agriculture and forests, land reservation, forced migration, etc. Thus, they are in an ethno-nationalistic struggle for getting their political recognition. All these works focus identity crisis of ethnic people as they are

addressed in different terminology. Similarly, they are being marginalized over periods through force settlement and losing ownership. In this paper, such issues and rationality of this community for *Adivasi* status were explained.

#### 4. Objectives and Methodology of the study

The objective of this paper is to explain the overall marginality of the ethnic people of Bangladesh throughout identity politics, the concept *Adivasi* as an identity, the rationale behind the ethnic people of Bangladesh demand and major arguments and contextual interpretation on the governments' explanation about their identity. The data of this study gathered through comprehensive interviews and questionnaires. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from selected samples through interview schedules and focus group discussions. Secondary data was gathered from published and unpublished research reports, journals, books as well as records and documents of relevant agencies. The targeted respondents of this study were the ethnic students at the Undergraduate and Master levels. The respondents were from Marma, Chakma, Koch, Rakhaine, Mro, Tanchangga and other communities who live in different parts of Bangladesh. They were selected by random sampling. Their opinions and responses were the main sources of collecting information. 11 interviews were conducted among the targeted sample. Two (2) FGD were conducted for this research purpose. 7-8 members were selected for each FGD.

#### 5 Findings and Discussion

##### 5.1 Ethnic Population at a Glance

The history of human settlement in CHT hill tracts goes back to the 1550s. The ethnic people claimed that they were the early settlers of these hill areas though there is no physical evidence of any particular group who has settled first in that area. Now, their demographic distribution is not limited to the hill areas and expanded to the plain land. Nearly 45 (unofficial) ethnic groups have existed in the different parts of Bangladesh and the total population is three million approximately. Officially 27 ethnic groups are recognized and the total number is two million approximately (IRI, 2020). The ethnic groups of Bangladesh are living in two different areas. One is the hill area, the inhabitant ethnic groups known as 'Pahari' or 'Jumma' and the other one is plain land ethnic groups. Chittagong Hill Tract is mainly situated south-eastern hilly part of Bangladesh. Plainland ethnic groups live in the districts Rajshahi, Mymensingh, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Khulna, Satkhira, Sylhet, and Patuakhali. According to Ahsan and Chakma (1989), this hill area is the homeland of 13 indigenous communities.

The Hill Tracts were made into a separate district under British control in 1860. According to the special regulation in 1900, the district was declared an 'excluded area' under the direct control of the provincial Governor of Bengal (Bertocci, 1984). Since then, major tribal chiefs or rajas controlled the three administrative subdivisions of the district. They (one Chakma and two Marma) also allocated the revenue collection and dispute settlement functions. These

roles were exercised through a hierarchy of sub-collectors and village headmen. Pakistan government repealed this status and constructed Kaptai Dam which uprooted approximately 100,000 ethnic people. It is said that conflicts of the ethnic areas were started in the Pakistan period. The conflict fueled the nation-building process in 1971. Mohsin (1997) revealed that under the Bengali/Bangladeshi nationalism the ethnic people had to face a new Bengali ruling elite and Bangladesh was created as Bengali dominated state. This state-building process had formed a new dimensional relation between Bengali and ethnic. M. N. Larma protested this kind of identity formation and said you cannot impose your national identity on others. As a Chakma, he cannot be a Bengali but a Bangladeshi (Siddiqui & Chakma, 2016).

## 5.2 '*Adivasi*': the term of identity

*Adivasi* is a collective term that refers to original inhabitants. In Bangladesh, India and Nepal, this term is used to identify ethnic minority groups. But, a debate started based on origin. The term was not well known until the pre-1990s. After the country's return to democratic system, the government tried to define the indigenous groups and visible minorities. It was the starting point of the debate where media played a significant role. Haq (2018) said that through the formation of Bangladesh the government continued to impose a hegemonic national identity over all citizens. According to her, it was the ground for creating and planning development projects in the name education, advancement, and livelihood opportunities. Activist Sanjeev Drong (2017) said that United Nations has its own criteria to identify indigenous people and that supported the country's decision and mentioned to ensure social, political, economic, basic rights of ethnic groups. But the current debate between government and non-Bengali ethnic leaders shows the uncertainty regarding their rights and recognition.

Haq (2018) also claimed that Non-Bengali ethnic leaders demanded their constitutional recognition as 'indigenous' or '*Adivasi*' instead of 'tribe' or 'small ethnic groups. They argued that they fulfill the United Nations criteria. But constitutionally they are not recognized yet. We got some empirical data about this case. One respondent Uday (22) said, '*in 1997, an agreement has been signed between the government of Bangladesh and the shantibahini. The term 'Adivasi' was recognized in the agreement. Accordingly, many governmental documents identified the ethnic people as 'Adivasi'. Later, in 2011, the Government redefined us as 'khudro nrighosthi'. Another respondent Kona, (21) said that 'each ethnic group is needed to be considered as a nation (jati) rather sub-nation (upajati). The constitution of 1972 treated us as upajati – which was not acceptable.'*

Ethnic people carry most of the features for being a nation including unique socio-cultural phenomenon. The general features that they claimed were: complexion (physical traits), residence pattern, living capability on the hill, language, culture, ancestral history of settlement, etc. The respondents named (Sukanta, 21 years) said, '*we should be recognized as 'Adivasi' that, we believed, would contribute to fulfilling our expectations. To my view, firstly, the term should be defined as a broader concept accompanied by some rights which are attached to that particular*

*term. Secondly; a formal identity will enhance our dignity. The other two identities – upajati and khudro nrighosthi- clearly made us inferior in comparison to Bengali people. If the indigenous people of CHT get that particular identity, we will get rid of existing discrimination on status, identity, and rights as the citizens of the country’.*

### **5.3 Force Settlement: Way of Marginality**

In 1971, immediately after the independence of the country, the indigenous population in CHT was 93% among the local population. Since then, Bengalese started to settle down there. Now, 50 years later, the population ratio of Bengalese and the indigenous are almost the same in number. According to Sutopa (2017), *‘the new arrival later becomes dominant through conquest, occupation, settlement, or other means. Through the new settlers, the government wants to keep control of the area, natural resources and the indigenous people’.* Dewan (1990) and Mohosin (1997) explained that the government wanted to ‘colonize’ the CHT people by that demographic shifting. State policies that were taken by the name of development were the process for being marginalized from the land.

In many cases, the indigenous people cannot utilize the resources at their necessity due to the control and different rules of the government. Bengalis have strong control over the bazaar and forest products trade. In 1867, there was enacted legislation that attempted to reduce the impact of moneylenders. By the legislation of 1900, ethnic people tried to control immigration and land settlement in order to protect themselves and their hill. Despite these efforts, the population of the Hill Tracts has expanded too rapidly which is higher than any other district. This can be the result of rapid immigration. Loffler (1990) did fieldwork among Mro people and denied the relationship between ethnic communities and Bengali society. Dewan (1990) studied CHT and said that government policies have periodically marginalized the hill people.

One respondent Mina (20) referred to the documents about the history of the settlement in the Hill Tracts. He claimed, *‘the history goes back to the 1550s when only the ethnic groups were the sole inhabitants of the area. It was continued till 1900. Later, the plain land Bengalese settled in that area’.* Considering this point, another respondent Mala (19) argued, *‘those ethnic groups are the early settlers of CHT. Since the 1980s, more settlers arrived at CHT and a chaotic situation has been created in the region. The ethnic groups were afraid of their existence and co-existence with the Bengali settlers. Finally, an armed group of ethnic people (shantibahini) started fighting for freedom’.*

Respondents unanimously denied accepting their current identity based on the population size rather argued to consider distinctive characteristics. The population of different ethnic groups varies in size which, according to them, should not be the defining factor of a nation. One respondent Nirala (22) said, *‘the concept ‘upajati’, based on the number of population is a political approach and exclusive. Besides the government’s administrative system, the indigenous groups have their own administration and ruling system. Many of them strictly follow the system and others have control over the community’.*

#### 5.4 Beyond '*Adivasi*' status

The respondents who are students from different ethnic communities think that the government of Bangladesh does not recognize them as *Adivasi* because of their political motivation. Many of the indigenous groups are indirectly controlled by the state through the defence forces, especially those who live in the CHT. The most common verse of this role of the government is that they are doing this for the wellbeing and betterment of the indigenous communities. Bangladesh as a democratic country, the military control over the particular region should not be executed. According to Bertocci (1984), in early 1983, the martial law government in Dhaka moved to establish an arm Village Defence Police among the new settlers, to upgrade the weapons used by regular security forces and to set up a jungle warfare training school for police personnel. This increasing militarization of the Hill Tracts has been aided an expanded road-building program with UN and Australian aid.

Avi (21), a respondent said, *'the cause for avoiding the recognition of Adivasi by the government is the regulation of international bodies. If any Adivasi group exists in a country, they have the opportunity to get some rights, privileges, and facilities from the state. The government of Bangladesh is unwilling to provide those facilities, rights and privileges. That is why the government intentionally denied giving them the 'Adivasi' status that grants some fundamental rights for them'*. In 2011, the government renamed them '*khudro nrighosthi*' through the 15th amendment of the constitution. This amendment as usual denied their recognition and introduced Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi citizenship. Thus, only two options were left in front of ethnic people, either being ruled by Bengali nationalism or remaining unrecognized (Saqi, 2017)

There are several points of misunderstandings between the indigenous and Bengalese in the CHT. Their common claim about the Bengalese notion towards them is *'the culture and the social system of the indigenous people are conventional, backward and have some peculiarities. Their culture is not developed enough; food is not elegant, the social system is not well organized, different food habits which are inferior, etc. Thus, they should not be recognized as nations. Rather a 'sub-national identity is appropriate for the ethnic groups. They rejected this argument which was produced by the Bengali community and claimed it a politics of representation*

By 1972, PCJSS (Chittagong Hill Tracts People's Solidarity Association) met with government officials to demand four-point statements. Firstly, they asked for their regional autonomy with their own legislature. Secondly, they wanted to reinstitution their 1900 regulation which made their area excluded. Thirdly, they demanded to rule their system by '*chief or rajas*'. Finally, they asked to ban immigration from outside districts. After 1975, there was made resistance against these proposals in Dhaka. After that, ethnic people turned their demands more radical. They called for constitutional self-determination to ensure their national identity. The respondents considered it as the prime factor of marginalization within the country. It also created an '*otherness*' context between the Bengalese and the ethnic population.



In the case of national identity on the basis of population size, the respondents again rejected the argument of the government. Their logic is that if the government considers nationality on the basis of population size, and indigenous people are identified as '*khudro nrighosthi*', then the Bengalese should be treated as '*brihot nrighosthi*'.

## 6. Conclusion

Their opinion to reduce marginalization and live like mainstream has been explained. Their voices make us understand the complexity of identity crisis which has already made them inferior in compared to mainstream. They think their identity is the source for being exploited. So, they expect a formal identity for getting prestige and human privileges.

Identity is like the ruling of life, rights of presence and recognition of absence. Worldwide identity politics and identity crises make it too sensitive. The case of ethnic conflicts based on rights and recognition are very common in human history. Similarly, the ethnonational feeling makes people desperate to have '*ownness*'. The ethnic people of Bangladesh have been demanding/claiming their ethnic identity since they were born in Bangladesh. These people are not Bengalese and are different from the majority in terms of physical appearance and way of living. As they are not recognized by Bengali identity, they demand an identity that would focus on their nationality. They cannot accept whatever they have and cannot get what they want. So, they have a bitter experience from earlier of this country. Thereby, they are now committed to struggle until the process of negotiation starts and grant them the *Adivasi* status which, in turn, would grant some basic human rights for them. They have not got something yet rather they have been recognized as *khudro nrighosthi* constitutionally. This paper thus, concludes with offering some insights on the persisting distressing feeling of the ethnic groups about their current status to the policymakers considering the peaceful co-existence of the Bengalese and the non-Bengali communities.

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