

## “Feeling of loss”: Ethnicity, Ethnographic Imagination and Identity construction of Mandi youth in Dhaka

Mahmudul H Sumon\*

**Abstract:** The paper explores Wanna/ Wangala, a Garo festival related to harvesting, its revival in the newer settings of Dhaka and its import amongst the urban Mandi youth. It focuses on how organizing for Wanna is bringing about a “consciousness” of identity among the Mandis, a community better known as the Garos to the world. The ethnographic example provided in this article presents us with the opportunity to explore theories of ethnicity, ethnographic imagination and identity in the wake of what I call the rise of transnational discourses of indigenous rights and its effects in Bangladesh.

**Key words:** Wanna/ Wangala, Ethnicity, Identity formation, Indigenous rights discourse, Adivasi, Bangladesh

### Introduction

Back in 2008-9 when I was doing fieldwork for my doctoral research amongst a network of adivasi activists, I have hardly found a house or a student dormitory which did not have a poster or two on “adivasi rights issues” or other related publications in this regard. In Dhaka’s Nadda-Kalachandpur area, where a good number of the Garos lived, I came across a type of publication which was circulated mostly within the community. In such publications, the young writers and students chose to debate topics such as how they have lost many of the “precious gems of culture,” how whatever remains are only remembered by the older generation, how the Garos were going through a moral crisis (due to different reasons including its woman folk’s “wayward” life style) and how city life was changing the “culture” of the Garo people in Dhaka. Students also did their own bit of salvage anthropology on different cultural practices and attempted to report the findings in these publications.

In this piece I explore Wanna, the Garo festival related to harvesting, its revival in the newer settings of Dhaka and its import amongst the urban Mandi youth. In the wake of what I call transnational discourses of Indigeneity and its assemblage in Bangladesh, I try to argue that an identity politics has emerged amongst the Garos and festivals like Wanna, are used by the educated young Garos of Dhaka and elsewhere to mark a “politics of difference.” I try

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\* Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka. Email: sumonmahmud@hotmail.com

to show how organizing for Wanna in the newer configurations of Dhaka, is bringing about a consciousness about identity or the loss of identity among the urbanite Mandi youth in Dhaka.<sup>1</sup> The ethnographic episode I explore in this article presents us with the opportunity to explore theories of ethnicity, ethnographic imagination and identity formation and how this is taking shape in contemporary Bangladesh in the wake of what I call transnational discourses of Indigeneity and its effect.<sup>2</sup> I try to argue that themes of reviving "our culture and tradition" espoused variously and consciously by a small group of young Garo activists and many of their social works are linked to the transnational discourses of Indigeneity, propounded by institutions like ILO and UN through conventions like ILO 107 and 169 and other instruments which give emphasis on protecting "culture" and "identity" of the indigenous people of the world. It is within this "power field"<sup>3</sup> of discourses and networks which began in the 1990s that I try to understand the increasing use and acceptance of an umbrella term "adivasi" among the different minority ethnic groups in Bangladesh.

For the generation of people among the Garos who are fifty or more, some of these discourses and terms are all very new. A Garo man of that age group once told me, "We didn't know all of this, we were not aware." I remember even a Mandi Member of Parliament saying in one of the seminars organized by a research organization<sup>4</sup> in Dhaka that much of this discourse about adivasi and issues of naming is new for him. But for the young among the Garo who prefer to call themselves Mandi, this is the discourse within which they have grown up. The Dhaka student-activists whose organizational activities I discuss here have seen the indigenous rights discourse unfolding in front of them. And they were accordingly finding their positions within this discourse. For this, they too were learning from different texts about the past, coming to terms with whatever historical knowledge is available. Such practices, I argue, instill a sense of history and identity, within the ambit of "adivasi" discourse.

The naming "adivasi" is variously justified by my Mandi friends. "Adivasi and not tribal (upajati)" is the title of a Facebook group where claim in favor of the term adivasi is made by the administrators of the group. Some of my Mandi friends/ hosts/ narrators are members of this group. A good number of my Mandi friends in Dhaka are regular visitors of cyber cafes to chat and use the internet facilities. Such technology use has increased their ability to voice up their issues tremendously from earlier times. In the following section, on the

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of loss of identity is an urban class phenomenon among the Garos. There is no fear of loss of Garo identity in the village areas writes Bal, an anthropologist/historian who did extensive fieldwork among the Garos of Bangladesh. See: Bal 2007.

<sup>2</sup> See Ghosh (2006) for this formulation of the idea of indigeneity.

<sup>3</sup> A concept borrowed from Li (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Research and Development Collective; n.d.

issue naming, I try to first present a standard answer, somewhat in a summarized form:

-The word upajati (Bengali equivalent of the word tribe) demeans us, it suggests that we are sub-nation but we are not a part to any thing. We are also a nation (jati)... we have history, culture of our own; the term adivasi on the other hand gives us a stake... it suggests that we were here from before, not just like any people who have migrated or like a lost tribe (as is found in Christian theology)

-Tribal or upajati gives a sense that we are a small somewhat isolated group ...that connotation is absent in the word adivasi.

-The word adivasi gives us respect... even now educated and powerful people (in this case the narrator meant Bengali personality of some influence and power) are coming to terms with this new term... often correcting themselves by using the word adivasi... instead of upajati... it feels good!

While these are standard answers to the rather directive questions of mine, there are more hesitant answers to this question too. A section of Garo activists told me during my fieldwork that they also prefer to call themselves Mandi, a word in Achik language meaning human being or human. Suvash Jencham, a Garo writer whose book is well read and referred among the educated Garos/Mandis argued that the term Garo is given by the outsiders and that this name has derogative connotations in Bengali. Young interlocutors (some directly involved with indigenous rights activism, some not) in Dhaka have often echoed with this same explanation of why they do not prefer the term Garo anymore. Garo is a term by which often the Bengalis call them: "Here goes the Garos, here goes the Garos, the Bengalis would shout" told one. "This call gives us a very disgusting feeling" "we often get annoyed by this term", Mandi activists in Dhaka often shared such sentiments with me. The senior and more established leaders, however, find no problem in the use of the term Garo as this is the word by which as they say "we are known to the world." For the educated, middle class or well to do representatives/ leaders of the community, adivasi is the "correct term" which they have popularized over the years (through writing and using it in the seminar talks and discussions). Its apparent popularity rests in the fact that ultimately this coinage of the term provides a scope to assert cultural difference from the majority Bengali population. The use of this term has encouraged the young Mandi activists to look back at the "origin history" of their own community and also helped to develop a consciousness of one's own community. The young educated students often asserted that they have history very much like the Bengalis and all other nations.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows I explore how this sentiment has been carried forward in the organizational activities of Wanna in Dhaka, the festival celebrated in the

<sup>5</sup> Interview of Shuvra Chicham, (2008-9) participant from West Kalachadpur area, Dhaka.

villages in the month of harvest and what this means to the young activists living in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh.

### Wanna as practiced in the village

Wanna (also spelled Wangala) is a harvest festival which used to be practiced amongst the Mandi population in the villages. Like many festivities of Bengal this is also related to the harvesting season. The festival, according to a facebook group formed very recently titled "Wangala Festival" is a festival in honor of the Saljong, a deity amongst the Garos who provides "mankind with Nature's bounties and ensures their prosperity"<sup>6</sup> or the Sun-god of fertility.<sup>7</sup> The symbolism of this belief came thorough the earlier system of belief amongst the Garos which is today referred as the Shangsharek tradition (Shangsharek dhara). The harvesting among the Mandi in the recent past consisted mainly of a kind of agricultural production known as Jhum cultivation (generically known as "slash and burn" technique).<sup>8</sup>

A news-paper in Dhaka described the Garo festival in the following way:<sup>9</sup>

Thousands of years ago, the Garos believed that fruits and roots collected from the jungle were their main food, as they did not have seeds to grow plants. One day they prayed to their god for seeds and the next day they found two types of paddy. They preserved those and started cultivating on the hills... After harvest, they used to thank their god first and then consumed the rice and celebrated the occasion. Wangala gradually became their major annual festival.

In the news paper reports, thus, we see a tinge of millennialism associated with the coverage of the festival and its history. Anthropologists as late as 1930s have painstakingly documented different aspects of the festival of Wanna performed amongst the Garo people living in some of the settlements which now falls on the Indian side. However, much of this research was conducted amongst the Garos living in the Garo hills of India.<sup>10</sup> Robbins Burling, a US trained anthropologist working on both sides of the border of Garo settlement, provided some description of Wangala in his most recent work on the Garos in Bangladesh (1997). But again this is not based on his observation in Madhupur district of Bangladesh where he did his fieldwork in the 1980s

<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garo\\_people](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garo_people) accessed 12/ 02/ 2012.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=261278977252049](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=261278977252049) accessed 28/11/ 2011.

<sup>8</sup> There is a formal ban on *Jhum* cultivation in the Madhupur district of Bangladesh. See Dey and Sultana 2009.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=162916#comments> accessed 10/ 02/ 2012.

<sup>10</sup> I conclude this information from an activist friend Mithun Raksham. In a publication commemorating the Wanna of 2007, he mentions titles such as Man in India (...) from the 1930s to make an argument that during this period there has been some interest for this festival amongst anthropologists.

but his work done in the early 1950s among the Garos in Rengsanggri, a large village which now falls in one of the northeastern states of India. With regard to the Garo people of Madhupur district of Bangladesh, Burling notes:

The people among whom I lived in Madhupur in Bangladesh cannot, by any measure, be counted as "traditional." Nevertheless, even the most modern Garos have heard many stories about their ancestor's way of life, and the traditions that the people of Madhupur described for me did not sound so very different from the culture that I experience at first hand during the 1950's in the Garo Hills. Indeed, when I began my work in Madhupur I found myself in the curious position of having myself witnessed a "traditional" culture that most of the villagers had only heard about from their parents or grandparents. I was an anthropologist who was questioned by the natives about the olden days (1997: 56).

In his Rengsanggri study Burling noted that there existed many animal sacrifices among the Garos [...] at several points of the annual cycle (1997: 56). These sacrifices, according to Burling, formed a central part of a series of village festivals, the biggest of which was Wangala, held at the beginning of cold season when the harvest was complete: "Wangala and the other festivals were tied to the cycle of slash and burn agriculture, and they marked the passage of the seasons. The sacrifices that were the formal part of the festivals helped to give order to the world" (1997: 56).

From Burling's description, we get a first-hand account of some of the practices which involved Wanna: he noted that usually families would cooperate to buy and sacrifice a cow, and each family would prepare rice, curry, and rice beer for visiting neighbors. The festival always began at the home of the first Nokma (Nokma used to be a special social status with certain responsibilities within the network of families amongst the Garos). Villagers would decorate the house, perform a sacrifice, and prepare the food, and then almost everyone in the village would gather for the feast. Men would beat drums and gongs and blow on a buffalo horn, and some performed individual war dances at the back of the main room of the house, holding a shield and brandishing a ceremonial headhunting sword. Later, some of the men and women, often those who were still young and unmarried, would dance in the courtyard between the houses. These festivals were hugely enjoyed. Rice beer always flowed freely (1997: 56).

From this description, it is possible to conjure up an image of a festival which was firstly a village affair with participation from almost all members of the village community. It moved from one "headman's" (Headman is a colonial construct, often textualized and institutionalized in colonial governance and rule. Burling's generation of anthropologists did not deal with this question and took it naturally or naturalized its effect) house to another and in places like Rengsanggri it took several days to complete the entire village. As Burling writes, "...all day and all night, a celebration would be in full swing at one of the village houses" (1997: 56). Each village could set the time for its festival, and people interested could extend their celebration by visiting the festivals in neighboring villages. It was also a time when "potential marriage partners in

neighboring villages could be judged. But they were more than just joyful celebrations" (1997: 56).

From some very recently circulated booklets commemorating Wana in Dhaka, we get some other views of the festivity. Here we get to know about the festivity and its spanning over a period of three days involving a number of sacrifices performed by a kamal (Kamal a spiritual person in the Shangsharek tradition whose position is not hereditary; in the day to day discourses, Shangsharek tradition, is often referred as "Shangsharek religion" or adi dharma (original religion) by the participants of this study. These new publications, which come out on the occasion of Wangala attempted to provide a detailed description of the festival. Through these texts, the educated Mandi men and women could read and know how Wana was performed in the past and what were the ritualistic procedures involved. Amidst these texts, we found missionary scholars who tend to see a commonality with this "local" tradition of Wangala with the thanks giving ceremony of the Christians, showing somewhat continuity with Wangala and certain church based symbolism. For example a write-up by Marak (who holds a church based position) notes that the "sacrifice and offering" aspect of the festivity is the religious side of the festival and the rest (food, songs, dance and merriment) the "social" side etc.<sup>11</sup> A. D. Smith (1986) in a discussion of organized religion and its relation with ethnicity noted that in practice, historically, organized religions after the first "enthusiastic" phase have reinforced (even if it has not ignited) ethnic sentiments with which they have coalesced to form distinctive religio-ethnic communities (Smith 1986: 35). This he noted in contrast to the common belief in the West that suggests that religion transcends ethnic and national boundaries. Missionary text I elude here can be seen as an indication of the appropriation of "local" tradition by the global organized religion of Christianity.

There appears to be some discourse among the young Garos which suggests that when Christian missions started to operate in places like Madhupur, much of the practices related to Shangsharek belief system were initially discouraged by the missionaries. Indeed, in Bangladesh, Christian churches in the 1990s have revived the celebration of Wangala in "a Christian way" to bring Garos from different denominational background together and to emphasize their distinct Garo cultural and religious identity (Bal 2010). As a result of this change of approach<sup>12</sup> from the church authorities, the festival of Wana, started to take place (often as a day event in the church premises) in many of the church premises of Bangladesh including Dhaka city's Farmgate area where there is a large concentration of Garo Christian community since the

<sup>11</sup> See a piece titled *W'angalar Katha* (The word of Wangala) in Bengali in Raksham (Ed) Wana 2007.

<sup>12</sup> In the words of one interlocutor, the change took place in some of the Missionary headquarters in Europe.

1990s. The first Wangala within the church premises was held in 1994.<sup>13</sup> But in recent years, this has been organized on the outskirts of Dhaka, in the Nadda-Kalachadpur-Kuril area with the leadership and organizing capacity of the residents of the area. It is to this phenomenon we turn our attention in the following pages:

### Wanna as practiced today

Antor Mankhin, a Garo student who was studying at Jagannath University, Dhaka at the time of writing proudly showed some of the paper clips of the Daily Star newspaper from an earlier year (from 2009) and some other newspapers where he thought the festival received a wider coverage. For him it was important as old Kamal named Joinik Nokrek (dearly called Joinik acchu by him and his friends; acchu stands for the word grandfather) was able to attend the festival and perform the puja. Showing those pictures to me he remarked: "We try to show all this [to the new generation]... how a Shangsharek preaches, how he gives prediction of the future year about harvest. This new generation did not see any of these....so we are trying to show them... so that they can also know [history]."

Antar was about 23 years of age when I first met him. At the time of writing he was about to graduate from the university. He lived in Nadda area in Dhaka with his elder sister, brother in law and their only son in a rented house. Antor's parents were Hindu by religion and lived in a small area called Jalchatra in Madhupur district. Unlike Garo people in general who were mostly Christianized, this area in Madhupur had a small pocket of Hindu population who were historically a tenant of a Hindu zamindar (landlord) from Natore.<sup>14</sup> Antor himself has converted to Christianity just before he got married to a Christian woman of Garo ethnic background. There was some unease from the family but eventually his mother, father and grand parents who practiced Hinduism throughout their lives, gave in to his demand. In terms of religious orientation, however, Antor's immediate family from both his mother's and father's side seemed quite diverse. His brothers and sisters have converted to Christianity and were married to Christian women from Garo families while his mother, father and grand-parents remained Hindus. His paternal uncles were also converted Christians. One of Antor's aunt (whom he called mashi) happened to be married to a Muslim and have converted to Islam (these religious differences within the immediate family did not mean that there was no day to day communication between the different nuclear families. During Antor's marriage ceremony, most of his family members accompanied him to the ceremony and took part in the festivities

<sup>13</sup> According to sources from Wikipedia. Unfortunately, I do not have any other source for this information.

<sup>14</sup> See Jengcham 1994.

surrounding the marriage which among other things included attending a Church service in the bride's residential area.

While I could easily consider Antar a new generation within the Garo community in Nadda, he was already thinking about his future generation who never saw Wanna to take place in the villages. He himself did not see Wanna in its proper village context. All he saw and attended was Wanna which took place in the church premises in his home district in Madhupur. However, his organizing experience as part of a large organizing team of the recent festival in Dhaka, his involvements from 2008-10 of organizing Wanna and his learning and performing "Greeka," a kind of "war dance", which has historically been associated with the Garos, his opportunity to go to India to see and participate in the festivity of Wangala <sup>15</sup> in Tura, Shilong, India (Shilong has a large concentration of Garo population who are Christians today. Wangala is also known as Hundred Drums in India; this festivity takes place within the organization of different missionaries working in the area), he seemed much more informed, matured and confident about the festival in general.



Figure 1

A participant of this study performing a Greeka; the image which came out in the news paper had the following caption: "The Garo people celebrate their traditional Wangala festival at the city's Banani Bidyaniketan High School yesterday" Photo credit: Anisur Rahman The Daily Star 05/12/ 2009 [Photographed by the author from the news paper]

<sup>15</sup> The visit was organized by an NGO working on "indigenous" issues. Often in development jargon such visits are termed as "exposure visit."

In the Nadda-Kalachandpur-Kuril area of Dhaka, an area of Dhaka where the Garos live in large number, the first Wanna I participated (in 2008) was inaugurated by a Church father which involved a prayer service at the beginning. According to participants of this study, Church fathers inaugurated the day long festivity "in the name of Jesus." But in 2009 and 2010 respectively, the festival begun with the khrita recitation of a Shangsharek kamal at the beginning, and it is this phenomenon which was seen by some organizers of this festival as a successful attempt towards reviving the "authentic" practice of Wanna or Wangala. My interest was in this "revivalist" tendency per se and the effervescence of culture which often it associated. In the following section, I will provide an analysis of how this notion of "revivalism" can be broadly related to the rise of indigenous rights discourse in Bangladesh. But before this, I will provide a descriptive account of what is practiced today as part of Wanna. My description here is of course partial:

Wanna organized in the newer settings of Dhaka is held in one day and usually it is held on a Friday considering the working people's convenience on Fridays, being a weekly holiday in Bangladesh. Usually an organizing committee is formed which takes up the responsibility of organizing the event. Some people, usually some one senior and responsible are selected to take up the position of nokma who leads the committee. These committees also have other office bearers such as accountants, media related committees and even publication related members and food committee etc.

All the Wangala festivals I have attended were held in school playgrounds which were rented for a day. The festival had a general look of a carnival (mela in Bengali). Mandi women and men and children come in groups often wearing dokmanda, or doksari (a type of dress, often reported as "traditional dress" of the Garos in the newspaper) and feathered headgears and ornaments. Women wear cloths which are usually very bright in color. Men also wear their special dresses (lengthy) on the occasion. Usually young boys and girls wear colorful outfits which acts like a clear marker of identity during such events. Interestingly, and much like many other places of the world, the sympathizers of Mandis, often Bengali activists and enthusiasts, try to insist on the so called traditionalism of the festivity.

A main stage is built where special guests take their seats. Usually there is a space for the audience who are provided with some seating arrangements. This takes place under a makeshift roof top made of cloths. Around the playground, food stalls are installed along stalls of other items such as homemade stitches and cloths, utensils, handicrafts, especially stuffs usually used by the Mandis in the villages are showcased for sale. On one occasion I also spotted and bought CDs and videos of Mandi songs (pirated copies of course, mostly from Tura, India) from the festival venue etc. Special Mandi dishes are sold. The program goes on for the whole day and people are expected to remain and enjoy for the whole day. Usually, the day ends with

musical shows (i.e. cultural program) where Mandi men and women/ occasional singers perform Mandi, Bengali as well as Hindi songs and these are played out in large sound systems rented by the organizers.<sup>16</sup> Some of the Mandi activists often would tell me that playing Hindi songs is not liked by them as this is seen as a cultural aggression or the influence of akash shongskrity (a Bengali phrase if literally translated will stand something like "sky culture." Usually by this phrase, at a popular level the advent of satellite TV and its influence into the minds of the people are indicated).



Figure 2

Objects containing religious symbols related to Christianity sold in the different stalls of Wangala 2010. Photo credit Nazneen Shifa)

Figure 3

Temporary stalls installed during Wangala 2010. Posters containing various symbols related to Christianity and Jesus Christ are sold. Other objects are also seen.

In Wangala 2010, organized in Banani Bidyaniketaan School on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2010, I also noted how the organizers played some sermons (khrita) on the large sound system and how the harvest festival was announced in Bengali and English. In this connection, I came to know of initiatives where the meaning of these khrita had been collected for a translation by interested activists as this was considered as a form of indigenous knowledge on the verge of extinction. From the organizer's end, there are certain formalities which take place at the beginning. There is usually an inauguration by a chief guest. The 2010 Wangala at Banani was inaugurated by an ex-military

<sup>16</sup> I provide the above description on the basis of three different arrangements that have taken place in three consecutive years (2008, 09 and 10) in Dhaka.

administrator, H M Ershad of Bangladesh. I did make some fun about the choice of this guest with the Mandi organizers. They however told me that this was unavoidable because the renting of the school playground was actually made possible through his influence. The guest panel included the nokma (who is elected by the committee who acts like a representative head of the event), writers, scholars and poets. Usually, they also discuss various issues of Mandi community and their different identity and culture.

In one case, this was followed by a number of animal sacrifices by a kamal. In Bengali this was being called puja (a Bengali word which is used by the Hindu population; puja means act of worship in Hinduism). This puja (sacrifice is given to Misi Saljang and Rakkashi, two deities amongst the Garos. One of the kamal who performed this puja later told me that it is expected that the kamal will be drunken during this period and have to satisfy and make them happy by making them drunk ...they give back seeds when they are happy (n.d. Interview of J). The sacrifice involved a cock (see Figure 4 & 5). On this particular occasion, the kamal's voice, reciting khrita, was put on the microphone so that the audience could also follow what was happening in one of the corner of the festival squire. This kind of performances received very good coverage in local newspapers. The day event in the first half also included a procession, which is led by a person performing Greeka (commonly referred as war dance amongst the Garos).



Figure 4 & 5  
Sacrifice during Wangala in 2010 performed by J, Joinik Nokrek's son

Ellen Bal (2010) claimed that the recent performance of Wangala organized by NGO patronage did not show any 'overt' sign of Christianity. She noted how

young women wore recently designed Garo costumes, or celebrated the launching of lantern (a newly introduced element inspired by Buddhist festivities) or wore ornaments (which the author later learned had been collected by the organizers from Thailand, India and the Philippines) in order to celebrate the Wangala festival and of course how such festivals, attracted the representatives of the European Commission and various foreign embassies in Dhaka. For Bal this was a perfect example of "invention of tradition".

The thought of restoring Wanna from the "clutches of Christianity" was expressed variously in the writings as well as in the activities of the younger generation of the organizers at Nadda too who were likely to be more exposed to missionary discourses. In other words, missionary power with its repressive regimes on Shangsharek religion and its practices, opened up spaces for identity debates. In following through the text below I bring the example of this identitarian discourse, especially in the writing of a graduate student who was at the time of writing also an active participant of Wanna.

### **A Mandi student's plea to return to Shangsharek myth-symbol complex**

Suvajit Ghagra is a young writer of Mandi background, currently living in the Nadda area of Dhaka. He is from Madhupur district. In a piece of writing, which is autobiographical in nature, this young writer finds a different kind of antagonism in the wake of indigenous rights discourse of Bangladesh. He sees, unlike the stalwarts of indigenous rights activists, for whom state acts as an antagonist as far as the recognition of adivasi identity is concerned, Christianization of the Mandi population as a major threat to their identity and existence.<sup>17</sup> I take up this text in somewhat detail to show how indigenous rights activism has given rise to heterodox responses to what I call "identity making" among the Mandi students living in Dhaka. The piece titled "Christianity: My disfigured history, my disfigured culture" (2006) is particularly of interest to me because it touches upon some of the themes of resistive self and identity. He writes (and I here translate and provide an excerpted version of his writing published in a Bengali language journal):<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Although rights discourse brings in the issue of Christianity and its influence, it usually does not at least on paper pose Christianity as a major threat to Mandi culture. Usually it is the state which is seen as the major threat for the existence of its adivasi people (i.e. Drong's 2001 book declares that the state itself can be a threat to jeopardize a *jati*. See Drong 2001.

<sup>18</sup> In the original Bengali version, the writer used first bracket (.) on a number of occasions and I have followed his order but added some more brackets for clarity purposes only. The piece contained some Achik/ Mandi sentences written in Bengali alphabet which I have transformed into English and have kept in italic form. In this transformation, however, I have not followed any standard procedure of Roman

If this piece is read by my school teacher Mr. Binimoy Falia, he'd be so surprised that he wouldn't be able to recognize me; how has this boy changed so much, the boy who had completely accepted Jesus as God's child in body and soul, accepted him as the savior...the boy who would pray ninety-five times on his way from Pirojpur to Idilpur [place names where the author lived in Madhupur] just about five kilometer road, how the Saljangs, and the Tataras [names of deities found in the Shangsharek tradition] have taken a hold on this boy; surly he wouldn't be able to understand. He must have had an image of a nine or ten year old ... who would rather face the stringent punishment in the school but wouldn't go to school on a Saturday. Because, this day is for God, who himself had taken rest on this day after creating the earth...And now how this boy has violated these unbreakable rules and has in its place installed the Su-sumi, and the Rakkashi (Mandi deities);... He would be more surprised to know about the Saljang, the Tataras, and the Goiras; because, he didn't know even their names. There was no one to inform then. They went (i.e. the missionaries) to our jungles to spread the word of God, "civilization" (my emphasis), to Christianize the "uncivilized" Shangsharek people. We have now become that. Ninety-nine percent of all the Mandis on this planet called earth are now civilized (!) Christians (!). That is why when this Civilized-Modern-Christian-I search for selfhood in this time of globalization, I discover myself to have been converted. I have left behind my thousand-year-old religion; I have left my culture... We have damaged our history, and culture. But, today I want to invite [my teacher Mr. Falia]. I intend to tell you, come again, you'd talk about God, I will talk about Goira; you will talk about civilization, I will talk about my culture. You will talk about globalization. I will talk about our values. I want to tell the most successful Christian priest of Madhupur, take back everything, this civilization, [and] Christianity, we don't want these. But you have to return everything, which you have removed from us step by step, things that are now only history now; those of Rang, Kram, Aduri, Nagra, Millam, Sphi, Middi Amuoa, Dabak dakka, Jamai Sikka. I don't want to regret again and again by listening about these from my father and mother. I want to see for myself that we are doing amuoa again; we are again wearing lengthi (a kind of men's dress) and doing real Greeka, let us pour our fanktis (pot for drinking) with Chu (Mandi drink) and dance and see what bliss there was. Today, I wish to ask the cultured youth who visit Madhupur again and again, why they visit Madhupur so often, what is the impetus behind this and for what discovery? Does this mean that we've already lost something very important? Why the foreigners sanction huge money whenever they hear about Wangala, or Rugala? Are these too valuable? The likes of Dr Robbins Burling would know [referring to the anthropologist who researched among the Garos].

True, missionaries gave us a lot. I am not a traitor to deny all that by closing off my eyes. But this is too much to say that whatever we've achieved today is due to the missionaries. I see a lot of people saying exactly this in the church premises that we wouldn't have come this far had we not become Christians. But I think we need not to think in this way...And where is the logic to make this claim that missionaries have been the only people who brought the thought of God to the Mandis. Legend has it that when the British did not know how to suppress the

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scripting. Apart from core editing issues and shortening the text in some cases, I have not provided any supplementary notes or any other analysis within the text.

warrior Mandis, they started thinking how to bring this people under control. At the end, the clever British decided to spread the word of one God, the word of savior Jesus and the promise of heaven. Heaven loving people have time and again fallen prey to this. And the Mandi people lost even blatantly. They have not hesitated to throw away tradition, history and culture. Christian missionary people first approach those who are more or less educated. Then these school going Mandis become habituated with a furnished life style after becoming Christians and then they themselves start working in order to spread the word of God. Mandis habituated in jungle life became attracted to this school going life style. At some point, the missionaries put the seed of hatred for the Shangsharek ways amongst the Mandi Christians. Slowly, Shangsharek religion, our mother's religion became the religion of the "evil" [my emphasis]. Mandi culture had no place in Christian religion or Christian culture. They were so successful to sow the seeds of Christianity among the Mandis that there was a time when the Shangsharek [people] were joked upon in all spheres of life. This is how Christianity has disfigured our culture, our history. We have lost our original culture. There remains some bewals (custom) which is unknown to even my mother and father. Few years ago an old man died in our village. Incidentally, this old man's sisters were Shangsharek. They came and started Rama Aganetta (showing the way). If translated in Bengali, the meaning would be something like this- 'go along that way where you will find a bridge, or take the left side, you will find a boat. Tell the boatman about me, he will help you cross.' This is how the sisters were showing the way to the dead soul in a pathos tune. After returning from the grave, they made a doll from a piece of cloth and hung them up on their back and cried looking at it at the back. I asked mother, what all this meant. My mother said, "Recollection of memory (almost like saying) in childhood you were like this. We adored you on our back and onto our laps. Now you are gone, be good you little one!" One is bound to be moved and will definitely be lost in the thought of the eternity when hearing such tune of Rama Aganetta. No one can remain unmoved and not cry. Let my farewell also be like this. But I wonder, whether there will be a single person for Rama Aganetta by that time. Instead, showing the way for the dead soul of our relatives, we are now showing way for the sacred soul (!).

[...] Wangala [(!)?] seems to be yet another ploy to make a farce of the Shangsharek people. In some cases, this is business. But then this Wangala too did not take place for many years. It is just ten to twelve years that we have had Wangala at Pirgacha (referring to the area in Mandhupur). The organizers are again the priests at the missionaries. There was a time when they said (the missionaries) none of these could be allowed; Kram, Rang, Aduri, how can these take place in God's house? Mandi people thought this was done for the sake of religion! And then after many years, they themselves came to say (i.e. the missionaries), come let's do Wangala, this is your culture, you must not forget it. But not for the Saljangs, but for Jesus Christ. Signboards were erected Jishuna Wangala (Wangala for Jesus). ... They became deities twice and we did not have a clue!

Our Shangsharek dharma [Shangsharek religion], and culture were so rich that had any talented Mandi writer documented it, perhaps this Shangsharek Puranas would have challenged the Greek myth. Compared to the Jesus, Rakkashis (Mandi deity of energy) was no less. There was no one to document these. By the time talented people who would be able to write were born, the Saljans, Goira, Tatara,

Susumi, and the Rakkashi were all sent in seclusion from the land due to the dominance of Jesus born in a faraway place. ....

[...] today the Shangsharek people are neglected too. In 1971, at Jalchatra Mission, a foreigner father was distributing milk and cloths. He refused to give away to one person that time just because he was a Shangsharek. I can only guess today what that old man might have felt but I have seen the plight of kamal acchu with my own eyes during the last year's Wangala at Pirgacha (which coincided with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of father's priesthood there). When the father was being presented with gifts etc. suddenly kamal acchu was going up on stage with a khutup [a type of head-wear of the shagshareks]. Few Mandi fathers stopped him. In the end he was not allowed to the stage. I hate such culture-less people, who just tie up work with religion, who are just born for religion. Now we see some "cultural elements" [my emphasis] being brought back, don't know whether they are being done intentionally or just carelessly; had there been respect for culture from the beginning, our bewals (customs) would not have suffered this sorry state.

Radhanath Bhowmik is the first Garo Christian in the history of Bengal; a villain in the Shangsharek history...It is through them that today we have this negative conception of the Shangshareks, Shangshareks are now on the verge of extinction due to a process of continued conversion. The likes of Radhanath Bhowmik are legendary figures in the history of Christianity in Bangladesh. Mandi Christians somberly remember him. But to the ones like us who are today in search for our identity, our roots, these people are not respectable people. Because, it is the likes of Radhanath who opted first for the sober and glittering life style and that is why Christian religion was acclaimed among the Mandis. I am, however, not in favor of the opinion that Christianity is the only reason for the downfall of the Mandis. I am talking about history and culture. All cultures of the world are mostly based on religion. In this case, Mandi culture as a whole is based on Shangsharek religion. True, the mystical Garo life style would have looked odd today but I think for the need of time some parts of our culture would have changed anyway. But I don't believe that it would have been difficult had we kept the original bewals intact. On the contrary the world would have known another culture which is so rich.... But that was not possible after converting to Christianity. I have pointed to the reasons before, because the Mandi culture was based on religion to a high degree. That is why with the change of religion came the change of culture. With changes in belief, and rules/ regulations, came changes in behavior, and life styles. But what could not be changed were the Mandi social norms. Till to date, Mandi matriarchal system stands tall, also remains mother's rights. Feminist Mandi rules or matriarchal system happens to be up to date; as such Mandi women did not have to fight for their rights. There is no synonymous word for rape, that heinous act in Achik language. In our childhood during Bible classes we came to know about how dishonesty is carried out, yet we have not found a word for this in the Achik language. Had we been sensitive to culture, a lot of bewals would have remained even after Christianity. Actually, the missionaries were fearful thinking that if the thoughts of Mandi deities are not removed, it wouldn't be possible for them to instill Jesus in the minds of the Mandis. If they are not completely removed, the faith would not be strong. And that is why they started destroying the culture. But now we see Wangala in the name of Jesus without any hesitation. What would have been wrong had this took

place before? A lot of bewals would have survived with Wangala. No one now creates barriers in issuing dama, rang, aduri from Pirgacha Mission when Joinik acchu of Chunia organizes Wangala. Had there been this sense hundred years ago, a lot of the rituals wouldn't have died...

[...] There are many other ethnic groups in this country. The Chakmas and the Marmas are much ahead from us even if they are not Christians. Then why would one think that the Mandi's would have failed? Sooner or later the Mandis would know its path of advancement. But too much thinking of God and lust for heaven influenced and as such missionaries became established in a short span of time. By establishing schools at the villages and teaching them, the missionaries transformed the Mandis into pure Christians. Like the religious teacher who read Arabic in the maktab (Islamic school), I have myself memorized Bible in my childhood. I too have experienced Christian 'fundamentalist' attitude in me (emphasis in the original). I too knew that one wouldn't go to heaven without the name of Jesus. But I can now think beyond Bible's conventional sources...

[...] I am thankful that the missionaries have not attacked our title. My grandmother is a Ghagra, so is my mother and I am Ghagra too; unless, we become Costa, Rozario, or Gomez [All Christian titles commonly found in Bangladesh]... [W]hy the Mandis turned to Christianity? For what reason? We did not have a system of Varna. And what can I tell about our past economic situation? I do not want to exacerbate my sorrows by writing about this any more. Today we say this out of sorrow or perhaps out of some sense of caricature, that it is our Saljangs wrath upon us that now we have become so poor. ..

Ghagra's narrative provides us with an apt example of Foucault's understanding of power effect and the constitution of the subject. The text I reproduce here is an example of resistance. Ghagra, recounts his everyday experience of studying in a missionary school and reflects about his experience and thinking about culture, and identity. The subject effect here needs to be read in the context of intense Christianization of the Mandi population in Bangladesh (Mandi people often say we are now almost hundred percent Christians) and the Garo Hills in India. The piece is also an example of how Ghagra is appropriating the grand narrative of culture and how generalizations are made about "Mandi culture" as such. His narrative is not devoid of what could be said the effect of ethnologizing of the Garos. But the author here uses the received knowledge of "Mandi matrilineal culture" to represent his community and argues that the Mandis are matrilineal.

Ghagra's autobiographical note briefly and summarily points to a domain of inquiry which is often ignored in the indigenous rights discourses. In the process of resisting missionary power, we see the emergence of rich 'myth-symbol' complex in his narrative. Such an emergence and communication of symbolism is indicative of the formation of ethnic identity. For A. D. Smith the 'core' of ethnicity, resides in the quartet of 'myths, memories, values, and symbols' and in the characteristic forms or styles and genres of certain historical configurations of populations (1986: 15). Thus, one may conclude that Ghagra's text is an exemplar of ethnic agency.

Organizing Wanna for a group of activists I knew during my doctoral research has meant going back to the villages and seeking knowledge from older people who practiced Shangsharek way of life. Activist students would often find it difficult to describe the details of the ritualistic procedures of Wanna performed in a Shangsharek

way. Often they would tell me that the “people in the villages” could tell, “not us.” Often they would banter me by saying that I should do my research in the villages where I would see the “culture” of the Garos and not in the cities. They would, however, stress the need to perform Wana in the “right” way or in the “real” way even when performed in the cities. For some of the activists at Nadda this has meant getting in touch with Joinik Nokrek (from a village named Chunia, Madhupur), a kamal of some repute among the Mandis. For most of my friends at Nadda he was a known figure, respected and lovingly called acchu. Joinik Nokrek’s participation in the festival has been seen by some of the activists as a “genuine” effort when it comes to performing the puja for Wana. The participants and organizers of the Wana festival that I have described above have had a great respect for Joinik Nokrek. Of late he has become somewhat a known figure among the Mandis in general due to some publicity through the newspapers of Dhaka. The number of Shangsharek people were always in the decline according to most of the participants of this study, and even on few occasions, some continue with the old religion (as is commonly said), they often die converted (Church fathers convert even the terminally ill people and then there is of course this fear for heaven, said one participant, laughingly).

Wangala festivals organized elsewhere were generally seen as something superfluous although these were equally participated with much enthusiasm. By the time this study was being completed there were more news of organizing Wangala in some of the other localities of Badda area of Dhaka and some other parts of the country too. Some of the participants I knew looked at those efforts as not authentic and driven by business motivations (organizing Wana can involve fund collection from the high ups or powerful in the government). For all of these reasons and also perhaps due to media hype, Joinik Nokrek is treated as a special person. Media attention of Joinik Nokrek gave him and his family, especially his son who lived in Dhaka and seemed to be connected with Indigenous rights network, an added responsibility to continue the age old practice. As noted earlier, Wana requires animal sacrifices such as pig, goat and hen. This means that it is not possible for ordinary people to celebrate the event. Joinik Nokrek in recent years also received support from the local administration in the form of rice donation for the event. All of these resources are used to perform the different rituals of Wana.

With some opening of space for the Shangsharek tradition, it was now turn for Nokrek’s son to try to learn some khrita (sermons) recitations from his father. Although his father has performed certain pujas all through his life, J could not follow this tradition. J had converted to Christianity. Yet, he was trying to learn from his father. J thinks that his taking up residence in Dhaka for a livelihood has restricted him from taking a full apprenticeship of his father. He claimed, his learning remained incomplete. J, despite his limitations of living in Dhaka and having a poultry job along with his wife (which they must do for a living in Dhaka) gave me the impression that he was trying to follow his father’s footsteps.

I am inclined to argue that a self-identification process has begun amongst the Mandis in Dhaka. Writings in the wake of indigenous people's rights discourse are more open to debate, available in languages accessible by the educated women and men, in Bengali and in some cases in Achik. It occasionally uses anthropometric information of which I am critical and read this practice as an effect of the colonial discourses but there are other discourses which capitulates on personal/ collective experience and memory of a community. Thus, there is a proliferation of discourses when it comes to questions of identity. With more than one and half decade of celebration of the International Day of World's Indigenous people in Bangladesh and ever rising of participation of people (from different adivasi communities) in this day celebration and many other programmatic activities throughout the year, it is perhaps not difficult to conclude that a consciousness in the name of "adivasi" has emerged and this is expressed in the form of ethnic symbolism that is seen in the writings of Mandi youth.

The organizers of Wanna are using whatever myth-symbol complex is available to them and the intentionality is to assert their identity and this is being expressed in their publication efforts and writings too. According to the instrumentalist theory of ethnicity, (which broadly falls in the modernist school in the study of ethnicity and nationalism) ethnic and national units "afford convenient 'sites' for generating mass support in the universal struggle of elites for wealth, power and prestige, and that, given a world of scarce resources but high levels of communication, ethnic symbols and boundaries are able to evoke greater commitments and easier modes of co-ordination of different sectional interest under a single banner" (Smith: 1986: 9). In this view ethnicity is fundamentally instrumental which 'serves purposes other than the cultural goals which its spokesmen proclaim to be its *raison d'être*, but it does so by combining economic and political interests with cultural 'affect' (Smith: 1986: 9-10).

The organization of Wanna had some local economic considerations. The youth organizers I report in this article were not necessarily at the helm of things. There was a senior group in Nadda involved in different professions who started off this festival in the area. The model existed already in different churches and practiced. However, there existed some misunderstanding (often attributed by my respondent group to class division; Nadda people were often seen as poor and uneducated by the elite sections of the Mandi population who lived close to the city centers in Dhaka) within the Mandi community in Dhaka which is why Wanna is split in two and organized in two different areas of Dhaka.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> By the time this piece was published, the number of different Wanna festival in the city of Dhaka was on the rise. There were often counter-accusations that Wanna was being organized with a business motive.

There is no general consensus among the organizers of Wanna as to how Wanna can be performed. Nor should we think that this has anything to do with religious belief. One interviewee, an organizer of Wanna in Nadda-Kalachandpur told me that their attempt to continue with the original Wangala is not liked or preferred by people who are conservative Christians among the Mandis. In another interview, a Mandi fund collector for Wanna told me how he was reprimanded by an educated Garo woman (working in an NGO) for whom there was "only one God and no point of praying for the Saljangs." However, such sentiments did not deter the young students to insist to bring on Joinik Nokrek to inaugurate the proceedings of Wanna in Dhaka. For the young, the trope of culture seemed to be an important one. This effort to continue the 'original' Wangala (which is said to have been performed by Nokrek at Chunia) appeared to be supported by some young Bengali activists and researchers along with Mandi university graduates. And this support meant financial support as well.

The young group of students with whom I have had better acquaintances were the ones who tried to advance the festival in a Shangsharek way. As the publication and publicity department of this committee rested with the young university goers, it received better publicity in the newspapers. For them too this was a new experience. From my own observation, interviews and a survey (where I did not hesitate to ask about matters related to faith after having a fair acquaintance in the area) I came to this conclusion that this claim to purification by its secular organizers is an over simplistic statement and festivity of Wanna does not have anything to do with faith or religious belief in general. In practice all the Christian symbols (posters of Jesus Christ etc) are found during the festival, which suggests a strong hold of Christianity among the population living in Dhaka. But Wanna acts as an important identity statement or "cultural" marker of separateness of the Garo people from the Bengali majority people living in the city.

It is due to this issue of identity that although there may be local reasons of organizing Wanna, I intend to attribute the discourse of Wanna to the intervention of the effect of indigenous rights discourse (self-identification and history) in Bangladesh of which the relatively lesser educated mid age generation (the core organizers, for whom economic considerations are important) of Wanna organizers appear to be less exposed. In the word of one senior organizer, who was holding an important position of Wanna 2010, this new generation is more conscious about identity. "We were not very conscious about these things," he admitted. Thus, Wanna, in the eyes of this student-activist group were a way of going back to the "real" or at least if nothing else an attempt to bring back some "semblance" to the occasion.

By the look of the proliferation of "adivasi" discourse, in the public sphere, one thing is sure: The young educated adivasi students are the first to be caught up in this discourse, best found in expressions such as "the term

adivasi has given some sense of pride ...now every educated adivasi knows that the term 'Tribal', with which we have been referred to in the past, is not the right word." The use of the word "adivasi" has also given an additional intellectual responsibility for the activists; they now try to understand how they are the "original" settlers, trying to sort out things from whatever historical material is available, how they have history and different social organization and symbols which clearly separates them off from the surrounding and numerically dominant Bengali Muslim ethnic groups. Thus, the event of Wana can be seen as a festival where the concerns for identity (popularly in the narrative form of *atmya porichoyer shonkot* i.e. identity crisis, *harie jaoa* i.e. loss, *shikare fire jaoa* (call for going back to the roots because all *jati*/ nations have roots/ origins etc.) are expressed. Wana organizing for this group has meant to go back to the roots and history. For some this meant a close association with people who still live the *Shangsharek* way and are not converted to Christianity. Symbolisms involved in Wana and popularization of this festival by educated Mandi educated class in the development sector often with a Christian background is an indicator of the instrumentality involved in it. Looked from an instrumentalist perspective, then, much of the activities surrounding Wana and its increasing popularity can be put to some context. This case also shows how instrumentalist approach to theories of ethnicity has found a ground in Bangladesh.

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