



ARTWORK: JAYATU CHAKMA

The Politics of Indigeneity and the Jumma struggle for land and recognition

HANA SHAMS AHMED

THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION OF THE JUMMAS

In May 2011, Iqbal Ahmed—first secretary of the Bangladesh Mission in New York—stated at the 10th session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples (thereafter the Permanent Forum) that there were no indigenous people in Bangladesh. His statement was in response to a report that was presented by a special rapporteur appointed by the Permanent Forum on the status of the implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) Accord. I was present at the session of the Permanent Forum that year, coordinating the work of an advocacy group, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission. Our work was to lobby the Government of Bangladesh to implement the CHT Accord that was signed between the government and the Jumma rebels in 1997 that ended more than two decades of armed conflict in the southeastern

region of Bangladesh. Three of the most contentious sections in the CHT Peace Accord—the resolution of land disputes between the Jummas and the settlers, military occupation of the area and the political autonomy of the Jummas—remained unrealised. Having faced complete apathy from the government and having exhausted most of their national advocacy efforts, a section of the Jumma activists took to the Permanent Forum and other international indigenous peoples' organisations and donor countries to influence the government of Bangladesh to end the military occupation of the Hills, return the land of the indigenous Jumma people and give political sovereignty to the Jummas.

The pushback on the usage of the term 'indigenous' in the African and Asian context had, interestingly, first come from within the Permanent Forum itself—from UN special rapporteur

Miquel Alfonso Martinez, who in a report presented at the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) in 1999 stated that the term 'indigenous peoples' was not applicable to the postcolonial situations of Africa and Asia. Martinez questioned the claims of Indian indigenous delegates at the WGIP in Geneva and stated that neither the Asian nor African situations qualify for the usage of the term 'indigenous peoples'. He added that in "... post-colonial Africa and Asia, autochthonous groups/minorities/ethnic groups/peoples cannot claim for themselves... the 'indigenous' status in the United Nations context". The indigenous delegates at the WGIP protested this assertion by making a culturalist argument for the use of the term and argued that activists from across the world have used the term as a cultural and political tool to seek justice through transnational activism where the nation-state they are a part of have politically, socially and economically marginalised them as the nation's 'others'.

In Bangladesh the term "adibashi" has been used in government documents but when the Jummas and other ethnic groups from around the country gained leverage through the activists' participation in the transnational activism, the government dismissed its usage and the foreign minister of the country stated that it was a "misnomer". There have been debates over the usage of the term among some scholars too.

However, the denial by the Bangladesh government in 2011 was also driven by transnational donor-funded agenda. The report by the special rapporteur in 2011 recommended that the United Nations should monitor human rights violations by the Bangladesh military before they are allowed to participate in UN peacekeeping missions (It should be noted here that Bangladesh being the 10th most densely-populated country in the world is one of the highest troops contributing country in the world to UN peacekeeping). The first secretary in his speech objected to these recommendations and said that since there were no indigenous people in Bangladesh, the special rapporteur cannot make such recommendations to the UN.

In this article, I will present some of the debates around state recognition of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh and the differences in perspectives. But my objective is not to come to a conclusion about terminology and usage. I acknowledge that these debates are out there and ongoing, and I want to use the debates over terminology and categorisation as a point of departure to look at the political, social and economic marginalisation that the Jummas of Bangladesh face—that of living under a hegemonic nation-state where they face the same kinds of oppression brought about by European colonisers—violent takeover of land, everyday violence, intimidation, surveillance and military occupation, as well as attempts to cultural assimilation and political and economic marginalisation.

The debates over identifying categories takes the discussion away from the situational politics of state violence and majoritarian marginalisation and fails to challenge the processes that normalise violence and oppression.

Continued to page 7