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While the construction of essentialised identities obscure power relations and while it is certainly not a catch-all solution to the violence and marginalisation they face, the Jummas and other small ethnic communities around the country, having failed to become an equal participant in the Bengali national imagination, have chosen the “adibashi/ adivasi” or “indigenous” identity to form transnational solidarity spaces with indigenous groups around the world.

FORMATION OF COLLECTIVE POLITICAL IDENTITIES FOR ACTION AND SOLIDARITY

While the indigenous communities in the Hills developed the Jumma identity as a strategy against the state in the 1970s, following the signing of the CHT Accord under pressure from India who withdrew their support for the rebels as part of their own political strategy of maintaining good relationship with the Awami League-led government of 1997, a section of the Jummas soon adopted a wider transnational indigenous people's movement as a strategy. The first International Decade of the World's Indigenous People from 1995 to 2004 at the UN General Assembly helped the indigenous people of the Bangladesh achieve this objective by strengthening transnational ties to indigenous people from around the world in similar struggles with the state.

Much of the critique from scholars over this terminology have come from the perspective of the critique of neoliberal governmentality. These scholars point out that, in their search for recognition, the Jummas have reached out to western governments who themselves have their own history of colonisation upon

indigenous peoples and a political agenda to manage relationships with postcolonial countries in order to erase their colonial history and present settler colonisation. Sumon argues that the discourse for recognition as “indigenous people” emerged from the NGO-driven agenda that began developing in the 1990s, when many of the activists who were earlier reluctant to use the term ‘adivasi/adibashi/ indigenous’ started to use the term in their project proposals. In a similar vein, John R. Bowen has argued that there is a crisis of representation in such a universal concept as ‘indigenous peoples’ as it is mostly the NGO-led activists who advocate for recognition under this category.

While a group's self-identification as tribal or indigenous may not be “natural or inevitable,” Tania Lee disagrees that such terms are simply “invented, adopted, or imposed”. In the case of Indonesia's dictatorship and a similar denial by the government as in Bangladesh, Li sees it as a “positioning which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle”.

Indeed, in the case of the Bangladeshi indigenous people, it has been their positioning against a state which continues to oppress them by taking away their land and inflicting various kinds of injustices against them and letting others do so through impunity provided by the state. Bengt G. Karlsson who is critical of this categorisation also argues that, in the case of the indigenous activists of India, the concept is already “out there” and it is necessary to engage with the claims of the people instead dismissing them. He adds that it is problematic for anthropologists to take it upon themselves to decide whether the people concerned should call



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themselves indigenous or not.

In the context of Bangladesh, Lailufar Yasmin points out that the post-1971 cultural hegemony of the Bengalis has attempted to delegitimise the place-based identity claims of the non-Bengali indigenous communities of Bangladesh and the construction of the official national Bengali identity is illustrative of the “positional power employed by the state vis-à-vis the minority indigenous peoples”.

In 1972, when the first constitution of Bangladesh was written it did not recognise anyone other than Bengalis as the citizens of the country. In the 15th amendment to the national constitution of Bangladesh passed by the parliament in June 2011 it stated that “... The people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation and the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis”. The 12 different ethnic communities living in the Hills are not Bengali and through this declaration the state essentially rendered them as non-citizens of the country.

Many of the aspects present in settler colonies are also present in the Hills. The advocacy efforts for recognition as ‘indigenous’ comes from groups who are fighting against state hegemony and marginalisation and that starts from the constitution where Bengali and Muslim are the only recognised category and all others are “minorities” and not recognised as true citizens of the country. These aspects absent in the constitution left Jumma people with no other option but to fight along the lines of recognition as indigenous. Underlying all these contestations about terminology is the demand for self-determination brought about by decades of state repression in the form of mass violence, military occupation, loss of land, discriminatory policies, social marginalisation and state hegemony.

Unfortunately, movements are always in a position to be co-opted by powerful groups for their own purposes which more often than not, have nothing to do with the people of the movements. However, this should not delegitimise that movement. Many point out that there has not been an even voice for demand of this recognition. However, to expect that everyone in a movement will work together without differences is itself a form of colonial essentialisation—it is not unusual for groups to have differences in their approaches to recognition. There is a common denominator to all those in the movement—to fight against the state's hegemonic policy over those who

are considered the nation's others. It's the long history of internal colonisation, the resource exploitation and state-led terror which led to the positioning of the Jummas and their violent revolt against the state, against each other and against the vulnerable people within themselves.

The Jummas have suffered from state repression for decades under the Pakistani state and the Bangladeshi state before they refused to be recognised under conditions set by the state. The Bangladeshi state's majoritarian politics not only reduced the Jummas to becoming the nation's others but through state-sponsored media campaigns, Jummas were framed as ‘traitors’ and ‘terrorists’. Seeking recognition as ‘indigenous’ itself became a form of refusal and a protest against domination and state hegemony.

The argument from the side of the government seems to be the right to self-determination attached to status of “indigenous” according to the ILO which they fear can feed ideas of secessionism and communal rights to land. However, the fear of secessionism seems to be unfounded as neither during the armed movement, nor afterwards, indigenous groups have only aspired for self-determination within the framework of the Bangladeshi Constitution.

In 1971, not only did many Jumma people join the Mukti Bahini, many were also rejected from joining on the basis of their ethnicity. This rejection continued when M.N. Larma and other Jummas went to the parliament in 1972 and sought legal recognition of the indigenous ethnic communities in the new country's constitution. The four-point manifesto that Larma submitted to the parliament sought autonomy for the region under the country's constitution in order to protect the land rights of the Jummas. It was this denial of constitutional recognition that triggered the armed struggle by the Jummas.

The ‘Peace’ Accord came about as a middle ground between the kind of autonomous rule that the Jummas wanted and what the government was willing to give. The setting up of the Regional Council and the Hill District Councils through the Accord was an attempt to give a semblance of autonomous rule. The establishment of the Land Commission was intended to ensure that Jummas could re-establish their communal rights over their ancestral land. However, Jummas claimed that the Land Commission Act was flawed and favoured Bengali settlers over the Jummas.

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