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**Bangladesh's Forest NGOscape: Visions of Mandi
Indigeneity, Competing Eco-Imaginations, and Faltering
Entrepreneurs in the Climate of Suspicion**

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Entrepreneurs in the Climate of Suspicion**

by

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Dedicated to the people of the Modhupur Bon Onchol.

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Some names of people and organizations have been changed in the writing of this document, while some other more public figure and organization names have not. Those intimately familiar with the area will likely be able to make some connections as to who is who. Although I have done my best to keep representations as accurate as I saw them, any inaccuracies or shortcomings are, of course, my own and not of my informants or friends.

Bangladesh’s Forest NGOscape: Visions of Mandi Indigeneity, Competing Eco-Imaginarities, and Faltering Entrepreneurs in the Climate of Suspicion

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The assemblage of competing development programs I call an “NGOscape”, effective in Bangladesh’s forest spaces, is a window into understanding both local and extra-local imaginings of the future of these spaces. By tracing the close interaction of three of the most prominent forces in operation in Bangladesh’s forest NGOscapes: indigeneity, environmentalism, and entrepreneurialism, I discuss how the government and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) work to increase management and securitization of these forces. Through ethnography and close analysis of the minority Mandi community, and NGOs in the capital city of Dhaka and in rural Modhupur, Tangail, I interpret Modhupur as a vital and telling site for examining the close interdependence of these three themes.

Adivasi (“aboriginal”) folklorization and representation is deployed by Mandi leaders and NGOs, and provides a space for Mandi internal debates about authenticity,

representation, modernity, and the way forward. Neoliberal imaginings centered on transforming Mandi livelihoods into something more appropriately modern are realized on the ground, evidenced by Alternative Income Generation (AIG) programs that push for market integration, and attempt to utilize claims about *adivasi* indigeneity to advance a security-management paradigm, national stability, and civic responsibility. Young activists and environmentalists based in Dhaka are crucial forces in promoting the broader development and NGO agenda, utilizing the themes of environmental responsibility and progressive conservation programs. Additionally, development agendas are complicated by other factors, such as eco-tourism trends that seek to indoctrinate the Mandi and other rural actors into acceptable and responsible ways of managing environment, while also relying on national pride. These competing forces rely on national pride and social shaming to transform rural Bangladeshis from being somehow “backward” into more desirable, modern subjects. Yet severe distrust within a larger “climate of suspicion,” between *adivasi* leaders, activists, and the state ultimately disrupt the fluidity of development practices at the local level. The result places various actors in precarious positions, left to interpret and be interpreted into development, NGO, and state-based objectives.

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Introduction

This dissertation is about the politics of indigeneity in place. It is about adivasihood and Mandi¹-ness as well. How do identities and subjecthoods such as *adivasi*² or environmentalist get negotiated with regard to environmental conservation, neoliberal development, and the form of the NGO? It is the story of Modhupur, but many of its themes and valences will sound familiar to those interested in contemporary adivasi politics across South Asia, and “native” and indigenous politics in other parts of the world as well.

When articulating a vision of adivasi politics or politics of indigeneity, we should proceed with caution, not least of which because we risk falling into a trap of trying to speak our own politics through that of a celebrated “native”. If we see in indigeneity a radical, unrealized potential of challenge to the developmentalist state, we must also reflexively analyze our own investment in that politics. I will note and contest this theme of indigeneity scholarship several times in the course of the dissertation.

¹ Note: I use the terms Mandi and Garo throughout the text somewhat interchangeably. (See also Bal’s (2000) and Burling’s (1997) arguments on the subject of using the terms Mandi versus Garo.) In any given context, I choose one over the other because it suits the sensibility of the sentence or passage. Put very basically, Garo is a more etic term and also more broadly unites the ethnic group across the border in India with that in Bangladesh, while Mandi is a more emic term used primarily in Bangladesh, meaning “person” in the Abeng dialect of Mandi. I gravitate toward Mandi, but use Garo when referring to a more etic rendering. While “Garo” has been disparaged in human rights circles and some academic circles as a racist and disparaging term, neither I nor other ethnographers who have worked in Bangladesh have found it to be typically so. Only once in the course of my fieldwork did I hear a Mandi make a correction by saying “Mandi, not Garo!” (in correcting a fellow Mandi not myself). I use both terms because they make sense in different contexts and are used by Mandi themselves contextually, or sometimes seemingly arbitrarily interchangeably. The single most common phrase I heard Mandi use to describe themselves, at least to outsiders, was “Amader Garo adivasi”, “Our aboriginal Garo people”.

² Adivasi – roughly, “aboriginal” in Bengali and Hindi, the most common term used to describe ethnic minority populations in India and Bangladesh, often termed “tribal” by British colonists. Hereafter not italicized.

While my scholarship is situated and subjective, I have not injected this kind of politics nor lamented its cooptation simply because that did not seem particularly important or useful to my informants. Rather, *their* indigeneity is one not of acceptance or rejection but of a negotiation, and one in which *my* politics may not come in very handy to them.

This dissertation is about capital and modernity, and about the projects of reforming lifeworlds into capital-modernity. But it is not just about this potentially, but not always violent process – it is about the agency of those seeking to make it, or to get ahead. It is about the pleasures of being indigenous, the pleasures of taking an oppositional stand as a victorious underdog, and the pleasures of being able to negotiate one's identity in its multi-facetedness.

It is about power and the taken-for-granted assumptions that come with Western charity and development. It is also about the stuffiness and arrogance that often accompanies leadership in rural spaces. I seek to portray the lived battles but also pleasures of a place rife with violence, subtle and overt, and with potential for more violence, with many vying for the cache its indigeneity and nature can offer.

Primarily, it is about people negotiating with powerful discourses, economic forces, and ideologies, insisting that mission Christianity, development, conservation, and government happen to at least some degree on *their* terms.

Introduction to the Topics of Analysis

What I explore is a particular field of development, but a niche which has, I will demonstrate, profound implications for the fields of power and culture and discourse which make up development in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Ecology and indigeneity, I argue, both of which have long part been the stuff of anthropology, speak to fundamental inquiries about where lines are articulated between nature and culture, and are also profoundly important questions for the current state of human affairs.

Environment's import should be obvious in the current global field of panics and anxieties about resource use and irreversible damage to eco-systems. There are very real consequences coming about due to global climate change and resource pressures, and the dynamic between "donor countries" and policy-makers and their recipients is vital in what is being done to rectify these challenges. Bangladesh has problems with pollution and crowding, but is simply not as big and not as much on the "global radar" as neighboring India and China about this burgeoning problem. As such, Bangladeshi environmentalists often argue, with convincing evidence, that Bangladesh is the victim of irresponsible industrialism of larger countries, but that that should not render them passive. To the contrary, Bangladeshi environmentalists argue that it is primarily the West who needs to engage in extensive *mitigation* of climate change and related environmental difficulties, while Bangladesh should instead focus on *adaptation* to new environmental realities.

Indigeneity's importance is not quite as obvious, but its force has impacts for tens of millions of the world's people, and is a subject for debate in many a nation-state. Autochthony, who is native to a place, and the complications of importing a Western

“settler-state” indigeneity model to Africa and Asia are vital. As I will describe shortly, in Bangladesh, these questions have particular valences, relative to the history of nationalism and colonial and post-colonial policy.

Finally, in the two, I also see an ongoing debate about technology and culture which has always attracted me. Intellectually and personally, I see a push and pull of locating oneself in a “modern” universe which involves accepting and rejecting various technologies which, in some sense, have the age-old human “cultural” task of superseding nature: how to live in or with, manage, or even conquer the non-human in which we live.

The push-and-pull between toward the “cultural” and “natural” worlds, some have argued, is only a part of the modern West, in which the “natural” must be set apart as a binary and often commodifiable category. With this image of a discursive construct of nature (of which man is not a part), we can deconstruct the development paradigm which focuses on nature and the environment – environment in development understood only as “nature parks”, “reserves”, and other demarcatable spaces. In contrast, we may then see that this as merely an outgrowth of capital-modernity, and represents only the practices of Western governmentality.

As I will posit in chapter 1, I wonder at this abstraction as less culturally-specific. If we accept that human cultural practices wrestle with nature in some form, how do they play out in the global flows that are development and environmentalist activity? I reject both “indigeneity” and “environment” as merely Western models on these grounds. Rather, environmental concern is to that degree part cultural push and pull. *How* this

happens varies greatly, however, and the *value* of various instantiations of “nature” and ways in which it is experienced vary widely.

Further, rejecting wholesale the logical import of “environment” or “indigeneity” not only undervalues their importance in post-colonial spaces, but also undervalues the agency of those experiencing and implementing these concepts at the local level. When Mandis wrestle with “culture”, they are using an anthropological term, but not one solely mediated by a Western colonial discourse on culture. When Mandis discuss the values of trees, they are using a discourse of NGO environmentalism, but not one divorced from their own internal discourses and views. I cannot claim to be able to access all or even many Mandi internal states. What I do is explore the meanderings of discourses on culture/indigeneity, and nature/environmentalism in these ethnographic spaces. I argue that what everyday people do every day in these spaces is often mediated by these hinges, these poles.

I am exploring the power of concepts which are inevitably outcomes of hybrid and multiple cultural forms and meanings. What’s going on with nature-culture in Modhupur?

The Mandi

This chapter has, so far, introduced the broad theoretical frameworks I have employed to understand the happenings at my field site of Modhupur, and at my

secondary field sites at organization headquarters located in the capital city of Dhaka. These will be further elaborated in the first chapter.

This section proceeds to offer some more specifics on the Garo (Mandi) people of Bangladesh, and in Modhupur, my primary fieldsite, in particular. While there have been relatively few extensive ethnographic treatments of Modhupur (Robbins Burling's 1997 *Strong Women of Modhupur* is the only one published in English), other scholars have written on the Garo, including Ellen Bal's (2000) '*They ask if we eat frogs*', primarily about Garo identity formation and centering ethnographically along Bangladesh's northern border with India. Treatises on the political situation of the Garo by Bengali researchers include Mizanur Rahman's (2006) and Fazlous Satter's (2006), and one by Mandi Albert Mankin (2004).

In terms of numbers, Garos are an extremely small minority in Bangladesh. According to Bal (2000), the 1991 population census estimated the number of Garos in Bangladesh at around 70,000 of an approximately 1.2 million non-Bengali ethnic minorities in the country. Although more recent censuses have not enumerated ethnic group identification in detail (Bal 2007), the 2011 census suggests 1.6 million in its "Ethnic Population" (meaning marked non-Bengalis), remaining at around 1.1 per cent of the national population. More recent estimates have held the present number of Garos as 100,000 to 130,000 (Mizanur Rahman 2006; SMB Rahman 2001). The majority of Garos in Bangladesh lives in the Mymensingh District, particularly along Bangladesh's northern border with India, while less than 25% (Bal 2000), though a concentrated number, live in and around the Modhupur Forest Area.

While there is a great deal of interaction, including inter-marriage and labor migration, between the Northern Mymensingh border areas and the concentrated grouping of Mandi around Modhupur, there are distinct differences as well. With Modhupur's proximity to Dhaka and its status as one of the largest (though dwindling) remaining plains forests (Bal 2000) of Bangladesh, it has become something of an epicenter of contestation over land rights and forest use, rendering my present study of environment and indigeneity possible. It is also in this status as an epicenter of land rights contestation and continuous battle between Mandis and the Bangladesh Forest Department that has reinforced a strong and cohesive Mandi identity, including, more recently, sustained reference to global indigeneity as a model.

In the interest of deconstructing and better understanding the commonly-assumed unified ethnic marker of "Garo", Ellen Bal (2000) extensively surveys colonial literature on the Garo, and finds mixed results. The fluidity and "fuzziness" to which she refers of these earlier potential instantiations of "Garo" are invaluable to understanding the move toward the level of unified Garoness seen today. Posing potentially unifying forces such as broadly shared cultural practices, centralized leadership, or language, Bal finds that she comes up short in any unifying characteristic. While I generally agree that we should contextualize and attempt to re-frame these colonial attempts at enumeration, and bring in ethnographic data in order to question them, the colonial history Bal thoroughly lays out appears to me to lend more credence to the idea of a cohesive "Garo" identity than she gives credit for.

Bal goes on to recount how, in her extensive ethnographic experience among the Garo of northern Mymensingh, her respondents would often reference a relatively recent past in which “different Garo divisions or *dol* [“group” in Bengali] played a significant role in the lives of Garos” (2000: 107). Each of these various groups differed somewhat in cultural practices and beliefs, and some informants emphasized their discreteness while others emphasized their unity, although nearly everyone agreed that despite the various *dol*, all were “Garo”.

Although my research did not center on the question of boundaries of Garo identity, my experience was similar in that many older Mandis emphasized the gradual dissolution of boundaries within the Mandi community. In fact, what was considered a nearly insurmountable boundary, the binary division of the moiety system into Sangma and Marak, had begun to be undermined. As recently as 1997, Robbins Burling’s research in the Modhupur area revealed that a Sangma-Sangma or Marak-Marak marriage was considered incestuous and nearly unheard of, while a large number of Mandis during my fieldwork expressed that this was not a major concern. In fact, a good friend of mine and a respected member of the community had engaged in a Marak-Marak marriage, and brushed it off as no big deal.

Bal goes on to articulate two major forces in the fostering of a unified Garo (Mandi) identity: religion (Christianity)³ and the succession of state entities which became Bangladesh. In the next chapter, I offer the religious contours of nationalism in

³ This focus on Christianity as a key factor in contemporary Mandi identity is thoroughly argued by Bal (2000): “Through the introduction of education, a lingua franca, and a more homogenous Christian culture, Christianity (and its messengers) became a significant factor in the ethnogenesis of Garos” (156).

Bangladesh to argue that religion has been a force both from outside and from inside adivasi communities, at times offering a way to coalesce and to circumvent the homogeneity of Bangladeshi identity by referencing Christianity or Buddhism abroad. As confirmed by my fieldwork, even when referencing the surrounding Bengali majority population who have historically been enumerated as dissimilar from the Mandi primarily in terms of *ethnicity*, it was frequently along the lines of religion (“*mussolman*” (Muslim) versus “*kristen*” (Christian)) that difference was articulated. Often in Bengali accounts of the Garo, Christianity is either absent (Satter 2006), down-played (Rahman 2006), or lamented. Robbins Burling (1997) also acknowledges its centrality, and confesses admiration for the benefits and cohesion brought by Christianity while still finding the belting of English hymns to be “difficult to deal with” and seemingly “out of place in the jungle” (177).

Garo History with the State

Due to freedom from the Pakistani regime, the Pakistani administration, we went to India to train. Most of our people, most of our adivasis, wanted to be free from the Pakistani administration. During the Pakistan period, we adivasis, well we didn't get any opportunity, or any chance to become soldiers. Or to get service, or any help from the government side. We were “third citizens” under the Pakistan administration. And both we, I and my younger brother also, we were freedom fighters. We fought during the liberation period. But it is very unlucky, he is no more today. Just, I feel, feel sorrow, whenever I just, I think about him. I never checked on him myself, and he was too, just, too young and energetic. And he was taller than me also, and fatter than me [laughing sadly]. – Albert Mrong, Mandi “freedom fighter”

In chapter 1, I will offer an accounting of some of the state historical formations and identity contestations taking place in the Chittagong Hill Tracts⁴ which, I argued, have had an impact on the possibilities for adivasis elsewhere in Bangladesh, such as the Mandi. This is particularly true in the land rights contestations for the Mandi in the Modhupur Forest area, where pan-adivasi and pan-indigenous articulations are some of the only means available; while Mandi have never engaged in a military confrontation with that State, as has been the case in the CHT, the politics of indigenous identity and nativism have been key tools of defense. Further, I will problematize the rendering of secularism as necessarily the solution to the “adivasi question”. As Bal notes, however, Garo conditions of production in Bangladesh have been more similar to those of Bengali peasants than those of adivasi groups in northeastern India or Bengal who have historically been “transformed into one large subordinate colonial labour force,” via “policy developments in forestry and agriculture” (2000: 13).⁵

In terms of state influences on Garo identity, Bal draws four recognizable dividing lines in which she traces the history of the state among the Garo of Bengal – minimal colonial influence, active colonial influence, the East Pakistan period, and the period of independent Bangladesh. What she finds is that relations early on in the colonial Garo Hills and in the lowlands of northern Bengal adjacent to them could largely be characterized as contestation between powerful landlords (*zamindars*) and the local

⁴ See van Schendel’s 1992 “The Invention of the ‘Jummas’” for a thorough account of this history.

⁵ Still, like the *jumma* identity of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Garo identity has been strongly influenced by alternate state policies of inclusion and exclusion, which have in some sense compelled the Garo to adopt a more cohesive identity. As Bal (2000) and Burling (1997) demonstrate, however, this has by no means meant merely adopting outside characterizations of what a Mandi, adivasi, or indigenous identity might entail, but by crafting one from a multitude of elements.

peasantry, including the Garos themselves. In 1869, the extensive *zamindar* influence in the Garo Hills was stopped by colonial power, who established a border that would later become the border of India. While Garo were involved in ongoing conflict with the *zamindars*, Bal argues that this did not necessarily constitute a unified identity.

According to Bal, what had a far more significant impact on the cohesiveness of “Garo” was the early twentieth-century designation of the northern Mymensingh region as a “Partially Excluded Area”, the influx of missionaries, and the formation of an “*Achik Shongho*” (roughly, “Garo Organization”) social welfare group. During the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan, the northern Mymensingh Garos, in the form of the Achik Shongho, protested their cordoning off from brethren in the hills into the new entity of East Pakistan, but to no avail. Following Partition, Bal documents a growing fear among the Mandi of living as such a small minority in a Muslim state, and she qualifies a common rendering of this border as being exceedingly calm in comparison to West Pakistan, arguing that there were prevalent fears of violence among the Garos, and constant fleeing to India, if not a lot of overt violence.

Although only one of several moments of panic during the political transformations of the mid to late twentieth century, the events of 1964 are one of the most referenced among older Mandi. Tensions had been building between the Pakistani state and Christian missionaries (and implicitly, their converts) in northern Mymensingh, and Bengali Muslim refugees were able to take advantage of implicit state backing in intimidation of adivasis on their land. As Ellen Bal reports, in early 1964 a large wave of Bengali Muslim immigrants, with the largest number from Assam, fled violence in India

to then East Pakistan, many into north Mymensingh. Together with Bengalis already living in the area and immigrants from elsewhere in Bangladesh, the rapidly changing demographic started a cycle of adivasi intimidation and exploitation, supported by local authorities (2000: 184).⁶ More Bengalis arrived to capitalize on the newly-vacant land, and adivasis continued to leave (185).

Most of the Garos who crossed the border ended up in refugee camps set up by Christian missionary organizations from abroad, and while there was support from Indian Garos and to some extent the Indian state, many Garos eventually returned to East Pakistan. Bal cites camp conditions, perceived quelling of the situation in Pakistan, and desire to return to homelands among the reasons many returned (2000: 187).

Many Garos returned to their former lands to find them newly occupied, and while some were able to recover their lands through complex court cases, many were left with no choice but to sell portions of their land to cover court costs and subsistence while they reestablished themselves (Bal 2000: 190).⁷ Bal calls the state's position "ambivalent and complex" (2000: 190), but generally concludes that Pakistan's policies toward the Garo were "repressive" and in line with general "Islamisation" (191) during this period.

During Bangladesh's war for independence from Pakistan in 1971, Pakistani troops were stationed on the northern border, and Garos again fled the intimidation for India. Similarly to 1964, Bengalis in the area took advantage of the exodus and occupied

⁶ Although more direct violence was inflicted on Hajong and Banai villages, the vast majority of Garos in the area fled to India in fear. (Similar cycles of state-supported occupation of adivasi land by Bengali immigrants have repeatedly affected the Chittagong Hill Tracts as well.)

⁷ Although (perhaps under international pressure) East Pakistani authorities suddenly encouraged the Garo to return, they banned missionaries from the border area, and did little to actively return Garo lands.

much of their lands (Bal 2000: 192). Once in India, a substantial number of Garo men joined the fight against Pakistan, such as Albert recalled to me at the beginning of this section.⁸

The post-1971 Bangladesh period has been a mixed one for Garos. On one hand, the state has vacillated between more inclusionist and more exclusionist policies toward adivasis (leaning toward the latter), and Garos often cite periods in which the more Islamist BNP party has been in power as far more difficult than periods in which the more secular Awami League has been in power.⁹ On the other hand, independence also brought with it the drastic influx of foreign non-governmental and aid organizations, many of them Christian (Bal 2000: 1996), which render the topic of this dissertation so prescient. In addition to Christian aid organizations which have become crucial for the Mandi in terms of employment, education, and healthcare, pan-adivasi organizations like the Tribal Welfare Association have offered some measure of both support from and protection from the state (Bal 2000: 202).¹⁰

While I agree with Bal's analysis that in present-day Bangladesh there is little active state resistance to the Mandi's positioning either as a unified Garo, as Christian, or

⁸ As I will revisit in the next chapter while discussing the delineation of who belongs in the nation of Bangladesh, these many Garos (and other adivasis) who fought alongside Bengalis in the 1971 war which is enshrined in Bangladesh's history as a moment of extreme heroism, martyrdom, and sorrow, are generally written out. Although several Garo former "freedom fighters" reported to me receiving nominal stipends from the government for their participation, it is typically only Garo researchers and organizations themselves (as well as some historians and anthropologists such as Ellen Bal) who have gathered and reported their contribution. While the Garo are generally not typically as much slotted as 1971 "collaborators" (as the Chakma of the Chittagong Hill Tracts have been), their charge instead becomes that they are too sympathetic with neighboring India (see recounting of the two main streams of Bangladeshi nationalism in chapter 1).

⁹ However, I will argue in the next chapter that Bengali secularism also does not escape the "adivasi question", being reliant on ethno-linguistic visions of unity and unfulfilled hints of pluralism.

¹⁰ Further, in terms of Garo representation is the (often noted among Mandi) election of Garo Promod Mankin to the Parliament, and his later appointment to be Minister of Cultural Affairs.

as indigenous, in Modhupur I found a contrast to her findings in Mymensingh that “the Garo Hills of India are no longer looked upon as their true country”, a contrast which can partially be explained by Modhupur’s recent history.¹¹ Despite general calm in Modhupur, Mandi frequently express a tentative desire to “return” to an imagined homeland across the border in India’s Garo Hills.

Modhupur

While extensive histories on the Modhupur area are rather scant, as noted by Robbins Burling (1997)¹² and Ellen Bal (2000), in this section I put together some rather speculative early history with some of the policy and legal frameworks which have helped to shape the present land and living situation of the Mandi of Modhupur, before providing a brief overview of the present context in which my work is situated.

¹¹ Although Mandi and other Mandi leaders in Modhupur are not articulating resistance to the state on a daily basis, clashes with the Forest Department and continually having “forest theft” cases being brought against Mandi leaders has meant a much higher level of suspicion of the state and its non-governmental and semi-governmental corollaries.

¹² Burling, in his 1997 *Strong Women of Modhupur*, attempts to gather a sense for what might have been the past socio-cultural life of Modhupur through analogy with his fieldwork in the distant village of Rengsanggri in the Garo Hills of India, on the basis that older Modhupur Mandi’s descriptions of an earlier time “sounded remarkably familiar” to his ethnographic experience in Rengsanggri: “Their grandparents held animal sacrifices that sound like those I had seen in Rangsanggri. Kinship must have been organized in very much the same way. Middle-aged people in Modhupur could even remember slash and burn farming. Thus it is not a total fiction to take Rangsanggri as I knew it in the fifties as background for understanding Modhupur in the nineties” (1997: 35). While the analogy may be inexact given Modhupur’s distance and disparate geographical features from the Garo Hills, older Mandis in Modhupur also reported to me similar ritual and religious practices to the ones Burling describes, including swidden agriculture. However, these versions of the Mandi cultural past cannot be completely separated from more contemporary interest in reviving connections to an imagined Mandi past which has consciously sought a kinship with the Garo Hills. Further, Mandi articulations of the past cannot be separated from anthropologists’ accounts, referenced in Mandi publications on their own histories (In Mankin 2004, for example) and Mandi oral references to anthropologists’ expertise on the subject. As Burling himself notes: “Indeed, when I began my work in Modhupur 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: 33).

In contrast to either the Garo Hills or the hill-adjacent plains of northern Mymensingh,¹³ much of the land in the Modhupur Forest area is raised just enough above the surrounding deltaic plains that it was not accommodating to the region's predominant wet-rice cultivation. Instead, Burling posits, this land would have been more amenable to Mandi swidden agricultural practice (sowing dry rice and other crops in intentionally burned clearings), a factor which most likely contributed to concentrated Mandi settlement in the area (1997: 75).

While estimates of the time of Garo settlement in Modhupur¹⁴ and in broader Bangladesh range widely, from “time immemorial” (Rahman 2006: 155) or “since the Aryan civilization” (2006: 63) to the 9th century, to the last century, the most consistent estimate for Garo puts arrival in the plains around the late 16th to early 17th century, with spread further into present-day Tangail within the following two centuries (Barkat 2009).

According to Fazlous Satter (2006), the 1878 Indian Tenancy Act was the first official state recording of the forested land of Modhupur. However, the land of the Garos living in Modhupur remained largely undemarcated. Nearly a century later, a 1951 gazette notification officially granted management of the area to the Mymensingh Forest Division, later to become a branch of the Bangladesh Forest Department (ibid 63), while another notification referencing the colonial Forest Act of 1927 created a Reserve Forest in Modhupur in 1955. The following year, an eviction notice was served to the Mandi living in the recently-declared Modhupur Forest. According to Satter, none of these were actually presented to the Mandi (ibid 64).

¹³ Where Ellen Bal (2000) conducted fieldwork

¹⁴ From the Garo Hills, and hypothesized to be originally from Tibet via linguistics (Burling 1997) and oral histories.

It wasn't until 1962 that Mandi became aware of the designs on their land, and under the leadership of Poresh Chondro Mree¹⁵ began to actively contest the government's notices (ibid 64-65). Mree was somewhat successful, as the Park was suspended in 1967, while again in 1968 and 1969 eviction notices were served (ibid 65). The project became temporarily moot amidst the tumultuous events of 1970 leading up to Bangladesh's independence.

The Park Project was revived yet again in 1974, and although Garo leaders were consulted, another eviction notice resulted. At this juncture, however, the problem became more localized, as Forest Department personnel looted some of the Mandi's pineapple and banana plantation (ibid 66), which had increasingly become a source of income for the Mandi in lieu of swidden agricultural practices.¹⁶ In the interim, however, Mandi loyalties became something of a political football (as has also been in the case in the Chittagong Hill Tracts), with then-Martial Law Administrator General Zia ur Rahman offering concessions in the form of "permanent settlement" in 1976. The back-and-forth continued, as Rahman's successor, General Ershad again declared a National Park in Modhupur, and in 1983 the government stopped collecting land tax revenue from the area (ibid 69). Many Modhupur Mandi still cite this juncture as a moment of panic, as they had felt somewhat assured that as long as taxes were collected on their land, despite its tenuous legal status, it would remain theirs.

¹⁵ A respected Mandi leader and founder of the organization Joyenshahi Adivasi Unnoyon Parishad.

¹⁶ The trend of local clashes with the Forest Department continued through the 1990's with ostensibly "illegal" plantation and woodlot being occasionally destroyed by Officers.

This paved the way for various projects involving land seizure and development, including 7200 acres of rubber plantation in 1986 (ibid 69), and a practice bombing range which started construction in 1978 constructed earlier came into full use by 1984.¹⁷ Again park plans were re-visited in 1999, this time under the name Modhupur National Park Development Project (ibid 69). Yet it was not until 2003 that more tangible evidence of actual implementation of the large-scale Park Project, the seeds of which had been sown over a more than fifty-year period, arrived in the form of a wall.

With the start of construction of a wall to surround an inner core for “conservation”, Mandi began to protest. The culmination of a series of marches, on January 3rd, 2004, some protestors began dismantling a piece of the under-construction wall at Sadhupara village, to then be fired upon by Police and Forest Guards. One Mandi protestor, Piren Snal, was killed, and another, Utfol Nokrek, was disabled from gunfire. Subsequently, construction was stopped on the wall and relatively little has been heard about the National Park Development Project since. This history will be revisited through the perspectives of two members of JAUP in chapter 5.

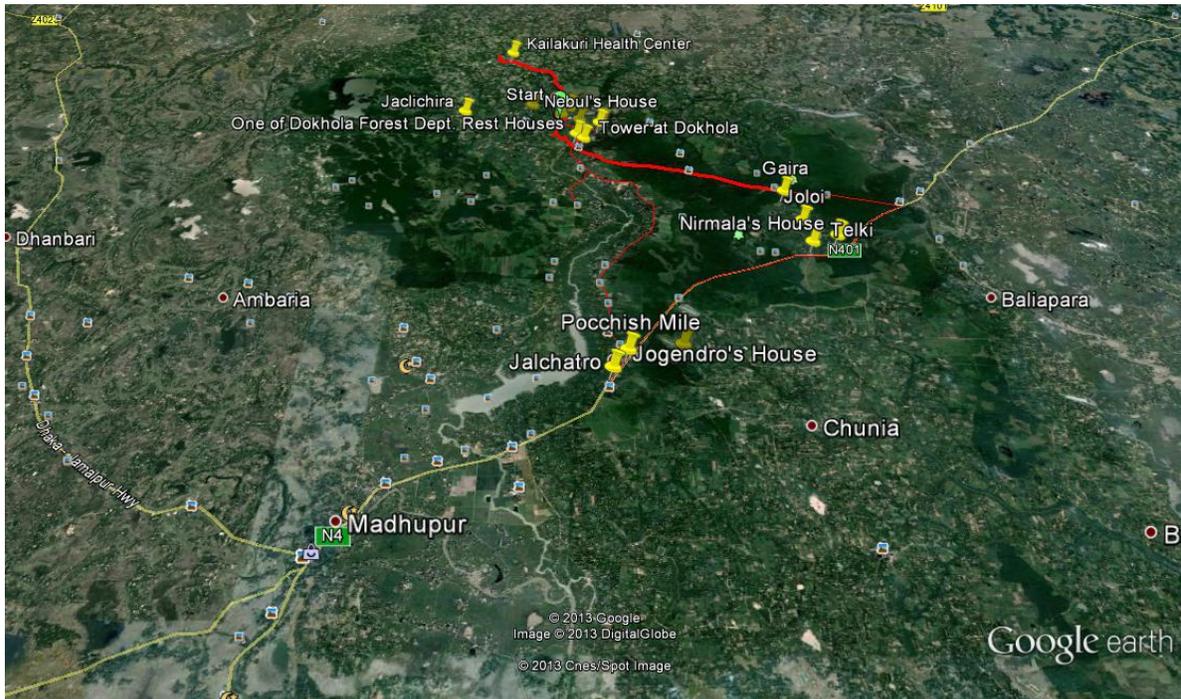
¹⁷ Ajoy Mree, personal communication.

Dhaka (see map 1). As such, it can partially be conceptualized as a linkage between the central and more urban Dhaka Division and more rural north-central Bangladesh. The Modhupur Forest area, or *Modhupur Gorh* (“Modhupur Fort”) is further northeast along the Tangail highway, with the market area of Pocchish Mile (“Fifty Miles”, the mile marker also used for the area name; the village name of this area is Jolchatro) serving as something of a junction leading into more forested areas. It is useful to conceptualize the Modhupur Forest Area in terms of this large market area of Pocchish Mile running along the main highway, with villages and forest area straddling the highway, and extending particularly north and west of the market area (map 2). Key sites of my research included the IPAC office in Modhupur Town, the JAUP office in Jolchatro, and other NGO offices around Pirgacha Mission. In addition, I frequented the villages of Telki and Chunia, as well as innumerable others, including Gaira, Joynagacha, and Jongolia.

There have been enormous societal changes over the past several decades for those who call themselves Mandi. Formerly remote villages have been rendered far more accessible due to new road construction, communication has been transformed by the widespread availability of inexpensive, pay-as-you-go mobile phones, and many from the Mandi middle class are either college-educated or are sending their children to college. Educational and career opportunities in Dhaka have also been a big source of transformation.¹⁸

¹⁸ As a Mandi college student puts it, “Garos just think ‘I will work for him’ but I’ll not try anything clever or offend anyone. Jobs are the same way. Garos here are working only four or five professions, for the most part. Parlors for the young women, drivers and guards for the Garo men who are working here. But those who live here in Dhaka for

A key axis on which societal change has been understood and contested by the



Map 2 - the lay of the land in the Modhupur Forest area, showing Modhupur town (Madhupur), and some key ethnographic sites

years, even more than ten years are mostly working in houses, and they are getting good salaries." See Burling (1997) for an moment in this transition.

Mandi is gender. Wider (Bengali, and primarily, Muslim) Bangladesh is extremely gendered, particularly in terms of its gendered division between private and public spheres. Mandi women present a quite notable challenge to that strict division, and Mandi property, power, and family structures are quite different than those of Bengali or Bengali Muslim gender structures. What this has meant is that along with other axes of minority status, Mandi “otherness” is often understood centrally along gendered lines. Thus, as Mandi lifeworlds become more intimately intertwined with Bengali lifeworlds, and increasingly urban and diasporic,¹⁹ those gendered structures have been both a source of transformation and a source of tension and difference with others.²⁰ One central way in which this change must be understood is in new forms of labor and labor relations in migration to urban service labor. Looking at census data from the Modhupur area over the past five years shows these important trends.²¹

¹⁹ “There are lots of differences between the village environment and the Dhaka environment. Like, in the village everyone mixes, we can all be together, or go around together. In Dhaka sometimes this happens, but it’s like not everyone has a good understanding with each other. Everyone keeps busy and to themselves. There, in the village, we have our own kind of community and ways of doing things. But we come to stay in Dhaka, and end up staying too long, maybe. Everyone has their different work life, or study life, and keeps busy like that, too busy. But in the village everyone lives together, close by. City life is a busy life. But there are a lot of places to work in Dhaka. And you can study and work at the same time. So for that reason, it’s like everyone in the village is starting to come to Dhaka.” – Ila Mree, a young female beauty parlor worker

²⁰ In chapter 3 I will revisit some of the ways in which racial, ethnic, and religious boundaries are often drawn with reference to women’s sexuality. Some primary axes of gendered boundary-making include women’s urban migrant labor, the deterioration in strict matrilineal and matrilineal practices, and fears of intermarriage and prostitution.

²¹ While the most thorough and lasting census data from the Catholic mission have been of “religion,” more recently the Mission in Pirgacha has begun taking census data regarding educational level and profession. Census data, particularly from 2005-2008, show the following: Education, at all levels, is continuing to increase among the Mandi, including at the level of professional and advanced degrees. Education is relatively evenly divided by gender, with a level slightly higher among women than men. While educational enrollment for girls in the country as a whole has drastically improved in recent years, literacy among women is still nearly half of that of men, so the Mandi display an exception to this trend. While the vast majority of Mandi describe themselves as farmers, an increasing number have at least one household member working a *cakri*, or salary job. The numbers of men working as shopkeepers and businessmen are much higher than women, and the primary migrant labor for men and nearly exclusive to men, is “security” work, for businesses, NGOs, and embassies, primarily in Dhaka. Relatively evenly divided are tailoring jobs and “health assistant” positions, as well as government and NGO work. Men are working more than women in Bangladesh’s enormous garments sector, while females dominate primarily in four fields, in order of increasing

Present-day Modhupur as I experienced it in 2010 and 2011 feels a place filled with “development”, both governmental and non-governmental, as the little remaining forest cover is sequestered in narrow strips. The majority of the land is under pineapple, banana, and turmeric plantation. Mandi complain of finally becoming a minority in their own land over the past several decades, though on a day-to-day basis, casual interactions between Bengalis and Mandis generally remain friendly.

Methodology and Positioning

In positioning myself in this ethnography, I was privy to some extent to both emic and etic perspectives on the people and the subject which I was studying, what I will later define as Bangladesh’s forest space NGOscape. That subject often interrogates the linkages between outsiders to the geographical and conceptual field that is Modhupur, and Mandi insiders. While this position never let me access both of these worlds fully, it also gave me insight into each, what I consider to be at once a major strength of the ethnographic approach and profoundly important to the “us and them” world of development and activism about which I am writing.

How to write this positioning is indeed a challenge, but as I progress through the ethnography, I appeal to your trust in the arguments and statements I will make,²² which

gender disparity: teaching, domestic work, nursing, and beauty parlors. Beauty parlor work is exclusively female and is by far the largest non-agricultural sector for the Mandis as a whole. It is followed by NGO work in numbers.

²² I initially encountered Bangladesh as a volunteer with the U.S. Peace Corp in 2004. As I underwent training with the Peace Corps, I was primed and cautioned in a way of thought I have found all too common among development agencies of many stripes: I was cautioned to be wary of all of the ways Bangladesh and Bangladeshis were out to get me, and with a familiar caveat that “through all of the hardship and poverty, they persevere and are happy”. They was really the operative term here. To someone conditioned, through his anthropological background and his previous experience abroad, to be sensitive to these issues, it was often extremely tense to be in a room, especially

will be positioned partially on that borderland and on those crossovers between two worlds which, while overlapping, are often marked by clear *theys* and *thems*, relatively fixed boundaries.

The majority of my first six months of fieldwork were based in Dhaka, conducting research and ethnography at the Minority and Environment Group (MEG), and tracing the projects, ideas, and trajectories of young environmental activists in Dhaka. I attended innumerable conferences on Bangladesh's environmental concerns during this time and, through MEG, met Asif Uddin of the Medicinal Agriculture and Conservation Council (MACC).

Later, I began to visit Asif and MACC in Modhupur, he serving as my initial introduction to the area (beyond what I had already read and discussed via my work at MEG). My time in Modhupur was episodic. I spent at least every other week in Modhupur, and off-weeks in Dhaka. This afforded me the experience not exactly of immersion in Modhupur, but of being a regular part of the community and a regular visitor. As an ethnographer I was privileged enough to live in Dhaka, to be able to move back and forth and remain abreast of both fields. As such, I operated somewhat similarly to a mid-level NGO worker, who often travels to Dhaka or occasionally, to Mymensingh

when local Bangladeshi Peace Corps staff were present and "they" was persistently discussed. This often very pronounced division between the a more vernacular rural and urban population and a more cosmopolitan and potentially bilingual population reverberates through development talk in Bangladesh, both domestic and foreign..

(the center of much “Garo” activity) for conferences, while maintaining an office “in the field”.²³

As a non-Bangladeshi, of European ancestry,²⁴ and as “Christian”,²⁵ I was often far more trusted by many Mandis than if I had been Bengali. Some of the reasons for this will become clear to those not familiar with adivasi history in Bangladesh as the dissertation proceeds. However, I also affiliated with Bengalis, and spoke Bangla, and therefore on at least one occasion was somewhat light-heartedly interrogated by Mandis for my status as adoptive “Bangal”.²⁶ Yet I also earned the confidence of many Bengalis, both those who I would consider generally sympathetic to the Mandi and those not.²⁷

²³ In this positioning as a mid-level NGO worker, I differed from how most foreign NGO workers would operate in several ways: in Bangladesh, foreigners (other than some lone missionaries) travel near-exclusively by private car (typically Land Rover) and occasionally by plane. In addition, most foreigners would rarely stay in local villages, but instead would be lodged in one of the handful of luxury hotels in the country or a facility maintained by an embassy or multi-national corporation. “Visits” to the field by foreign NGO workers are, further, extremely brief, and accompanied by entourage of facilitating and translating nationals.

²⁴ My ability to conduct research in Bangladesh comes in part from the history of British colonialism and Western imperialism. My sources of funding are organizations which are outgrowths of imperialist ideas and institutions, schools of general “Orientalism” which later morphed into “area studies” programs, as well as to some degree American efforts to better understand in order to relieve national security anxieties about “the Muslim world”. I operate as a subject marked by forms of racial, gender, class, and especially, national (U.S. citizen) privilege. At the same time, within both the context of Modhupur generally and within the NGOs in Dhaka in which I was working, I was a subject with less power than my informants. The majority in the NGO worlds in which I operated were comfortably middle-class. My informants operated in well-connected circles, where I was an outsider culturally, linguistically, and economically. In some sense, I was “studying up” in these circles.

²⁵ Racially, ethnically, and by my nationality, at first blush I was often perceived as having access to great resources and as being affiliated with the large donor sums, accounts, and organizations typically managed by foreigners. In practice, I was behaving more like a Bangladeshi NGO affiliate. If I was suspected of having access to these resources, locals were quickly disabused of this notion when they found out how I traveled, where I stayed, and for how long. As such, I could only be likened to missionaries and the sparse few other anthropologists, who are the exclusive foreigners in these types of spaces. My non-affiliation with the Church, then, became another moment of surprise.

²⁶ A sometimes-pejorative term for people of Bengali ethnicity, depending on context.

²⁷ My own biases are certainly of sympathy to the Mandis. Anthropologists are not immune from the trappings of the appeal of personal comfort and familiarity and I, like Robbins Burling (1997) before me, felt more comfortable in general in Mandi village spaces than I did in surrounding, often more urban “town” Bengali spaces. However, I also was sympathetic to the Bengalis with whom I worked in Modhupur, who were often maligned as calculating and exploitative despite making significant sacrifices and having good intentions, by a protectionist Mandi elite. (Chapter 6 will detail the case in which this was most apparent.)

Within this positioning, I critically analyze the role of particular styles of development vis-à-vis current NGO practices. This involves not only an interrogation of economics and power, but of the discourse of development. Central to my argument is a critique of the way anthropological ideas (modes of representation) operate, and not only those which operated during the time of “colonialism proper” or those which can be brushed aside as relics of a past age of imperialist anthropology, but ideas which have survived.²⁸ These ideas still permeate the discipline of anthropology, and informed my “native” choice of object, but I am primarily concerned the way lay understanding of anthropological concepts informs the NGO world.²⁹

The Present Study

The assemblage of competing development programs I call an “NGOscape”, effective in Bangladesh’s forest spaces, is a window into understanding both local and extra-local imaginings of the future of these spaces. By tracing the close interaction of the three most prominent themes in operation in Bangladesh’s forest NGOscapes: indigeneity, environmentalism, and entrepreneurialism, I discuss how the government and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) work to increase management and

²⁸ It is easy to see a general racism and exclusion of ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh; however, through the powerful fields of indigeneity and Christianity especially, there are also many privileges associated with being “indigenous” in general, and Mandi in particular. As such, I chose deliberately to not align myself with any particular political viewpoint overtly, though that in itself is a political viewpoint. As a Mandi friend reminded me around the fire one evening: “You are here studying, yet you don’t want to have an opinion! You have to have one, what is your opinion?!” Yet to directly align myself as only “advocating for the Mandi” in my research would have been naïve given what I was exploring. Instead, I bring development fields of knowledge-power and influence under the microscope and problematize them. As such, my research is not of the “activist” variety but inhabits a critique of power.

²⁹ This problem is certainly not restricted to Bangladesh, but helps to outline Mamdani’s “Culture Talk” (2002) in much of the world, popular discourses (often caged in the language of political correctness) which help the general public to understand, albeit in essentialized ways, what “others” are like.

securitization of these forces. Through ethnography and close analysis of the minority Mandi community, and NGOs in the capital city of Dhaka and in rural Modhupur, Tangail, I interpret Modhupur as a vital and telling site for examining the close interdependence of these three themes.

Adivasi (“aboriginal”) folklorization and representation is deployed by Mandi leaders and NGOs, and provides a space for Mandi internal debates about authenticity, representation, modernity, and the way forward. Neoliberal imaginings centered on transforming Mandi livelihoods into something more appropriately modern are realized on the ground, evidenced by Alternative Income Generation (AIG) programs that push for market integration, and attempt to utilize claims about *adivasi* indigeneity to advance a security-management paradigm, national stability, and civic responsibility. Young activists and environmentalists based in Dhaka are crucial forces in promoting the broader development and NGO agenda, utilizing the themes of civic responsibility and progressive environmental protection programs. Additionally, development agendas are complicated by other factors, such as eco-tourism trends that seek to indoctrinate the Mandi and other rural actors into acceptable and responsible ways of managing the environment, while also relying on national pride. These competing forces rely on national pride and social shaming to transform rural Bangladeshis from being somehow “backward” into more desirable, modern subjects. Yet severe distrust within a larger “climate of suspicion,” between *adivasi* leaders, activists, and the state ultimately disrupt the fluidity of development practices at the local level. The result places various actors in

precarious positions, left to interpret and be interpreted into development, NGO, and state-based objectives.

Chapter 1 outlines my theoretical bases, offering three broad background contours framing the remainder of the dissertation. The first is a brief history and explanation of Bangladeshi nationalism, focusing in particular on the importance of language, debates between secularist and Islamic visions of the nation, and natural landscapes. I argue that each of these aspects of Bangladeshi nationalism has important ramifications for adivasis in the nation, and proceed to outline the history of adivasi contestation, particularly via the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The second contour is environmentalism. I outline the many competing perspectives on environmentalism, and argue for the importance of understanding environmental frameworks in the post-colony. I argue that Michel Foucault's work on governmental security paradigms and the "milieu" illuminates the NGOscape in Bangladesh's forest spaces. Finally, I wrestle with the concept of indigeneity, as it has been understood via a primitivist discourse, and the extent to which global indigeneity and multi-culturalism are referenced in liberal circles in Bangladesh.

Chapter 2 provides an outline of some of the politics of Non-Governmental Organizations in Bangladesh, and in particular non-governmental organizations who deal with adivasi issues. I offer ethnographic detail which provides an inroads to the kinds of spaces and people who make up the contours of adivasi politics, particularly those geared toward the Modhupur area. I demonstrate how Modhupur provides a vibrant and vital context for studying the importance of questions of indigeneity to Bangladesh, and to

Bangladesh's environmental politics as well. I introduce questions about what these NGOs are involved in, and why.

Chapter 3 explores the key NGO function of representation. I demonstrate the ways in which external discourses about indigeneity interact with local appropriations of indigeneity. I use Mandi cultural festivals and debates about the significance of the Wangala harvest festival as an inroads into Mandi internal debates about representation and the significance of cultural. I demonstrate that various registers and implications of authenticity are key to Mandi internal debates about the place of "the cultural". Further, I make reference to the ways in which Mandi understandings of cultural alterity are often tied to gender dynamics. As detailed in this chapter, it is Mandi gender practices that have often intrigued anthropologists, and colonial officials, and this carries forward into contemporary understandings of Mandi alterity and indigeneity. Yet gender alterity historically associated with adivasi populations via ideas about sensual, available adivasi women creates space for Bengali fetishization of indigenous women, phenomena I detail at an NGO fair featuring Mandi "cultural" performance.

In Chapter 4, I focus on NGO work of the more developmental sort. I explore the in-vogue concept of Alternative Income Generation (AIG) being implemented in the Modhupur area, and having its roots partially in micro-credit and in Nishorgo programs intending to protect forest areas. AIG programs operate under the assumption that providing alternative, ostensibly more environmentally friendly avenues to locals (particularly adivasis) dependent on the forest will in the end sustain forest preservation. Here I also start to detail more heavily one of the themes of this dissertation (prevalent

also in the contexts detailed earlier), which is a “climate of suspicion” overriding many of the concerns in Modhupur.

In Chapter 5, I focus on environmental politics and ways in which the environment is imagined as an alternate form of income and assigned new types of values, particularly in terms of environmental appreciation for its own sake, environmental tourism. While environmental priorities in Bangladesh are many and often guided by a narrative of impending calamity and disaster, the amount of resources invested by some outside channels in more symbolic forms of environmentalism – conservation of native flora and fauna – are substantial. Who is the type of politically- and environmentally-aware spectator this form of conservation imagines in Bangladesh? I take a look at the types of actors perhaps most actively participant in this narrative – educated Bangladeshi youth activists. Then, I follow from their viewpoints to the trajectory of park-like conservation, showing how and why these environmental views are variously embraced, re-appropriated, or directly contested by the Mandi in Modhupur.

I conclude in Chapter 6 by looking especially at an individual and his situation, which ties heavily into all of the other themes highlighted in this dissertation. I look at a small NGO and its director, and how he draws on themes of indigeneity and environmentalism, as well as development and conservation via alternative income generation, to promote and implement his project ideas. What is particularly striking about the person of Asif Uddin is the way he is able to, on one hand, draw effectively on these emergent development themes of indigeneity and environment, while on the other hand, draw ire from the community in which he is working. In this way, he stands both as

a contemporary entrepreneurial NGO par excellence and as a persona non grata among that community. Asif also evinces a larger theme tying the dissertation together – an intense “climate of suspicion” in operation in these types of NGO circles. I finish by detailing how I also was incorporated into the climate of suspicion, and pose the question of how such a climate variously works for actors in different levels of vulnerability relative to it. How might such a climate favor or reward some and render others even more vulnerable as these types of operations proceed?

Chapter 1 – Theoretical Outline

Bangladesh: Critical Events, the Secularism Debate, and Adivasi Identity

In this first section, I provide a selective reading of the nation of Bangladesh in terms of the fomentation and maintenance of its nationalism. Bangladesh's history as an independent nation spans a mere 40 plus years, and debates about who belongs and what are the true meanings of the nation remain vital. I use Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Partha Chatterjee's *Nation and Its Fragments*, and insights from Gyan Pandey to wrestle with the content of Bangladeshi nationalism. Through it, I locate some of the vitality of the themes of this dissertation. In what ways do minority and adivasi populations challenge the national vision of linguistic, ethnic, and religious unity? Further, how do symbols of nation like museum representation and Bangladesh's forest spaces become vital to that vision?

Gyan Pandey's (1991; see also 2000) exploration of the demands for loyalty, for proof of citizenship, that inevitably arise in constructing a mainstream nationalism, are undoubtedly integral to every national construct, to one degree or another at various times. They are particularly salient in that construction, as he outlines in the 1947 Partition³⁰ of South Asia, the events and discourse leading up to it and following it, and subsequently-written histories. As Pandey explains of the demands for loyalty in India relative to Pakistan (then including present-day Bangladesh as "East Pakistan"), "Those [Muslims] that remained [in India], still harbored sympathies for Pakistan, it was

³⁰ For two compelling takes on the trauma of Partition, see the oral history of Menon and Bhasin (1998) and the poetry and short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto (2004).

rumored, and many of them were gathering and storing arms” (613).³¹ Pakistan, twenty-seven years later, underwent a bloody second Partition in the formation of Bangladesh. Nationalism in Bangladesh then, it is often written, experienced such trauma, of loyalty and redefinition, a second time in the events leading up to the independence struggle of 1971 and its aftermath (in Zaheer 1994, for example).

These events have come to be understood by historians as watershed events which shaped and defined who was Bangladeshi and who was not, and debates have ensued as to the extent to which various forces influenced those events.³² Historians have constructed their narratives accordingly, with various teleologies highlighting this or that factor as seminal in the supposedly inevitable events of the two Partitions. While the events of 1947 are rarely discussed any more in popular dialogue in Bangladesh, in contrast, the trauma of 1971 has left such a deep imprint that rarely does a day pass when the events of '71 are not referenced in the national news, with accusations of sedition and demands from one party to another for “proof of genuine belonging” (Pandey 1991: 608) to the national “core”. Bangladesh’s two main political parties, the BNP (*Bangladesh Jatiyotabadi Dol*) and the Awami League, frequently legitimate themselves by “inventing tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) which valorizes competing “founding father” narratives of the events of 1971—the Awami League highlighting the secular and linguistic roots of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s nationalism and the BNP valorizing the military and Islamizing achievements of Zia ur-Rahman (Uddin 2006).

³¹ In contrast, see Ayesha Jalal’s writings on the complexities of the “two-nation theory” and the figure of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, as well as reverberations throughout Muslim India (1985, 2000).

³² See Pandey (2001) for an account of how violence and community constitute one another.

Historiography of Bangladeshi nationalism reveals a limited account of the fomentation of a particular identity of the region which focuses on what Veena Das might term the “critical events” (Das 1995) of the 20th-century which resulted in contesting secular and Muslim Bengali visions of unity.³³ As stated earlier, popular discourse focuses on pre- and post-1971 manifestations of “Bengali ethnolinguistic nationalism, religious nationalism, and the more universal Islamist vision” (Uddin: 182). Reaches further back into history trace the fomentation of the language movement in the 50’s and 60’s, especially “Ekushey” (“21st”) or “Shaheed Dubash” (Martyr’s Day), February 21st 1952. The towering Sriti Soudho memorial outside of Dhaka has seven overlapping triangular structures, each representing a successive historical clash between Bengali language martyrs and the (Urdu) Pakistani state (starting with 2/21/52). Accounts focusing on pre-1947 cite the 1905 “first partition” of Bengal by the British colonial administration in 1905,³⁴ and some go as far as early 19th-century counter-missionary efforts by the Muslim intelligentsia which resulted in the first widely-circulated treatises on Islamic doctrine and practice in Bengali, and the first publication of a Bengali Qur’an (Uddin 2006).

The Centrality of Language to Mainstream Bangladeshi Identity

It is partly in the focus on language as a unitary aspect of Bangladesh’s variety of nationalism that the figure of the adivasi becomes a challenge. With little exception,

³³ See, for example Uddin (2006); similar accounts in Karim (1992); Osmany (1992); and a less nationalistic account in Zaheer (1994).

³⁴ For analyses of the 1905 partition see Cronin (1995, 1977); Limaye (1989); Saxena (1987); Chattopadhyay (1984); Rahman (1974); and Sarkar (1973).

though with much regional variation, Bangla stands today for most as a lingua franca in the country of Bangladesh. Despite the diversity of languages in the country, even many who would call their “mother tongue” otherwise speak Bangla with a near-native level of fluency. Bangla, as a second language, is learned by these second-language speakers through the national education system, Bangla media and entertainment, and of course, interaction with others through the medium of Bangla in everyday life.

As has been ably noted by Rafiqul Islam (2008), the relationship between Bangla and Bangladesh’s other languages we can call diglossic, recognizing the necessity for most whose native language is not Bangla to simultaneously use two languages.³⁵ What needs to be emphasized is that the dichotomy, the distinction drawn between the two languages typically functions in a hierarchy of power. One of the two (or three) languages is designated as the language of use in public institutional settings and with outsiders, while the other(s) are confined to more interpersonal or informal spaces. The political implications of this are obvious, and may sound familiar to anyone familiar with diglossic conditions in Bangladesh, as anywhere else. This facet of *diglossia*, its perceived “high-low” register distinction, illuminates perceptions of Kolkata-Dhaka linguistic differences, “standard Bengali”-“colloquial Bengali” differences, and the language politics which were and are still part of the bedrock of Bangladesh’s liberation; and most importantly for our purposes, Bangla-“tribal languages” differences.³⁶

³⁵ Among some of the upper-middle and upper classes, a *diglossia* with English, and sometimes *triglossia* with Bangla, another mother tongue such as Chakma or Garo, and English becomes compulsory for lucrative employment (especially business and large NGO) prospects abroad and domestic.

³⁶ The numbers of languages and language speakers of each are subject to debate, based on the particular classificatory and survey systems being deployed, but from a statistical, governmental, and development perspective,

Many Mandi youth, particularly those living in Mandi-majority towns and villages, speak Bengali more readily than Mandi.³⁷ Many Mandi elders, in turn, express fear that they may be “losing their language”, and with it, some of their unique identity. What I am especially highlighting here, however, with reference to Bangladesh’s history of nationalism, is that it is particularly challenging for minority linguistic groups to maintain language as a unique part of their identity in a nation in which the official state language is so deeply and emotionally enmeshed in culture and fomentation of an independent national identity.

Although Bangladesh’s ethno-linguistic nationalism does little to problematize many of Benedict Anderson’s frameworks and insights into the socio-cultural bases of nationalism, the construct of nationalism in Bangladesh is not unilineal.³⁸

the numbers of speakers of non-Bengali languages would be described as low in Bangladesh. Each language is, however active and in flux, and always in interaction with others, and as Burling (1997) hypothesizes, the idea that there has been a one-way flow of Indo-Aryan terms into other languages is highly unlikely; rather, Tibeto-Burman languages like that of the Mandi (as well as Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic) have also impacted and been borrowed from by early Bengali.

³⁷ The Mandi language (also known as Garo), classified as Brahmaputran, and further specified as Bodo-Koch, is spoken mainly in the Mymensingh District, but also in Tangail and Sylhet, is alive and well, and is taught across the border in Northeastern Hill University (Lewis 2009).

³⁸ Undoubtedly, Bangladesh’s elites were drawing from by-then global models of delineating an exclusive national community within a territory. The extent to which the models were “modular” is a matter of emphasis, yet Bangladeshi nationalism surely had antecedents in the “vernacular language” nationalisms of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. However, national histories which trace the roots of Bangladesh further than 1947 argue that religion, that is, Bengali Islam (while already locally and dialogically constituted) coalesced into a particular and cohesive identity with 19th century treatises in the vernacular. These histories, further, identify those early circulations, and especially direct translations of scripture, as already exacerbating Urdu-Bengali distinctions. Bengali translations were rendered more blasphemous than Urdu translations, referencing a linguistic and geographic hierarchy of closeness/distance from the Middle East (Uddin 2006). In this way, religion and language have interacted for quite a long time in defining an identity for the Eastern Bengal region.

Secularism and Islam

Although the elite political sphere of nationalism may be culturally constituted as secular, post-colonial national imaginaries articulated a realm apart from that domain which may have, to varying degrees, incorporated religion³⁹ as part of a cultural-spiritual construct of unity (Chatterjee 1999). While the religious print being circulated in nineteenth-century Bengal did articulate a religious community (sometimes a “nation” (Uddin 2006)) which could be imagined even without face-to-face contact or reference to divinity, whether or not this constitutes evidence of a complete revolution to “empty, homogenous time” (Anderson 1991) is of serious doubt, and not reflective of Bangladesh’s contemporary nationalist politics.

In Anderson’s model, religion was rarely integral to the nationalist project, but rather, the reconfiguration of people’s cosmologies was a *prerequisite* to the cultural shift toward nationalism. The “shrunken imaginings” to which he refers are intimately tied to the decreasing possibility of “Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet” (7) and the sovereignty of which he speaks requires a deterioration of faith in the “divinely-ordained” means of government. The role of the sacred script defined the religions of the “great global communities of the past,” functioning as the means of inclusion and exclusion, and operating hierarchically as the key to the divine: “In effect, ontological reality is apprehensible only through a single, privileged system of re-presentation: the truth-language of Church Latin, Qur’anic Arabic, or Examination Chinese” (14).

³⁹ Anderson’s exposition on the techno-capitalist “Origins of National Consciousness” provides convincing insight into the ways in which print-capitalism fosters community. Yet where Anderson may fall short in his application to Bangladesh is in his insistence in a near-complete dissolution of the role of religious and spiritual community in the constitution of nationalisms.

However, the hierarchical contestations between Arabic, Urdu, and Bengali suggest that Bengali Muslim “imaginings” have not been so “shrunk”, from the nineteenth-century to today, either among the masses or in competing elite nationalist discourses.⁴⁰



Figure 3 – “Prayer for Bangladesh” – a symbolic amalgam of support for the Bangladesh cricket team, mobile phone advertising, and religious visions of nationalism

It is here that I locate the second of Bangladeshi nationalism’s most important dimensions relative to the place of adivasis in the history of Bangladesh. The religious dimensions of nationalism in Bangladesh present a challenge to adivasis living in Bangladesh, nearly none of whom are Muslim. Adivasi groups like the Chakma, Marma, Santal, and Garo do not fit smoothly into either ethno-linguistic *or* religious dimensions of this nationalist imaginary. Many Bengali liberals and academics emphasize in particular the religious challenge of adivasi inclusion as being the primary barrier, and indeed difference is often articulated along religious lines for the Mandi, partially in the wake of mission Christianity – Mandi typically refer to Bengalis as “Mussolman” rather than “Bangal”.⁴¹

⁴⁰ See Heffner (1998) and Veer and Lehmann, ed. (1999) for treatments of modern global religious imaginaries; Jalal (2000) for complexity of Indian Muslim identity, including language hierarchies and pan-Islamism.

⁴¹ However, as I will discuss later with reference to scholar Lamia Karim, it is important not to over-emphasize secularism as a solution to inclusion in Bangladesh. Rather, both main currents of nationalism, secular ethno-linguistic and Islamic, have often failed to provide either an inclusive or an exclusive solution to the “adivasi question”. It is also important to note that, for many adivasi groups, connections to world Buddhist or, especially, Christian religious communities have provided windows of opportunity and dignity.

Many Secular nationalist historians of Bangladesh's language movement would enthusiastically agree with Anderson that such a shift to secular modernity was precisely Bangladesh's moment (deferred in 1947 by Pakistani religious nationalism) of realization in the events leading up to 1971. Pandey notes that in the Indian case, similarly, it was "the [secular] Indian nationalism of the Indian constitution, 'nationalism', pure and simple" which Nehru championed as superseding any of the "communal varieties" with which it competed (1991: 609).⁴² Yet what is left out of that imaginary is the dialectical relationship between a more pan-Indian Islamic or even pan-Islamic identity for Bengali Islam and a more secular and Bengali-culture-based orientation for the country (Uddin 2006).

This national memory-forgetting⁴³ (referenced in one of Anderson's two 1991 addendum chapters) provides powerful and emotionally charged rhetoric available to slot this or that ethnic group, language speakers, or religious identity (Mohsin 2003) like the Mandi into the perennial categories of martyrs and collaborators. Memories and amnesias (Anderson 1991) are repeatedly activated to circumscribe (in Pandey's (1991) terms) the unhyphenated national space, while hyphenated (Chakma-Bangladeshi, Mandi-Bangladeshi) nationals' loyalties, already suspect, are forever damned to the collaborator slot by these selective amnesias, despite any kind of past martyrdom for aspects of the nation's history.⁴⁴ Thus, non-Bengali or non-Muslim groups who were vital to colonial

⁴² More on Nehruvian secularism and Indian democracy in Khilnani (1999).

⁴³ The subject of "memory" is treated in Bangladesh by Wilce (2002).

⁴⁴ Uddin argues that this aspect of nationalism in general, and Bangladeshi nationalism in particular, result in a fragility and homogeneity which are constitutive of one another. As such, Hindus must be rendered as West Bengali, *adivasi* groups as Indian, terrorist, Burmese, or Pakistani, and Muslims who articulate a too-strong affiliation with a

resistance or even part of the Mukhti Bahini (“Freedom Fighters”) are now slotted as collaborators with foreign India or decisively anti-Bangladeshi due to more recent qualms with the state.⁴⁵

In the case of Bangladesh, the National Museum and the non-government Liberation War Museum provide a ready and grand enshrinement of the nationalist historical and cultural narrative.⁴⁶ In the case of adivasis, however, a different type of museum documents their narrative. In contrast to historically-oriented national museums,

Figure 4 - A cricket advertisement, showcasing the tiger, the shapla (water lily), and the beach of Cox's Bazaar -- key symbols of Bangladesh's natural beauty



regional museums of adivasi culture enshrine a familiarly anthropological ahistorical narrative, thus functioning as museums of social scientific curiosity rather than as sites of nationalist history. In Chapter 6 I will detail some of the resistance to museum representation among the Mandi of Modhupur.

pan-Islamic identity as 1971 collaborators, to sustain the fragile nature of an imagined national mainstream; and it is that same homogeneity which renders the national imaginary so fragile (2006: 145). Indeed, many Mandi were involved in various capacities in Bangladesh's war for independence (see Ellen Bal 2000 for a concise but detailed overview of this history).

⁴⁵ Works focused on the national exclusion of the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts include Mey (2006); Bleie (2005); Guhathakurta (2001, 2004); Mohsin (2003); Karim (1998); and van Schendel (1994, 2005).

⁴⁶ Undoubtedly partly in response to the critique of Chatterjee and others (though he describes it as “subsequent reflection”), Anderson's 1991 revision includes a chapter focusing on the importance of the colonial technologies of “Census, Map, Museum” to post-colonial nationalist movements. Museums provided institutions in which to collectivize the “nature of the human beings it ruled” (164), while census and map “shaped the grammar” by which it was possible to imagine a nation into being. While surely not the first to highlight the importance of these technologies (see Cohn (1971, 1987, 1996)) Anderson's incorporation of them into his theses on nationalism is an important addendum.

A final note with regard to Bangladeshi nationalism is that a key way in which forests and conceivably “wild” spaces become so vital is that they, too, are invested with national pride.⁴⁷ These symbols appealed to revived “folk” art traditions and the poetics of rural and green Romantic appreciation of early 20th-century poets like Rabindranath Tagore, giving Bangladeshi nationalism a “green” flavor which continues to this day. In the 2011 Cricket World Cup, Bangladesh’s marketing of its nation sought forests, rivers, tigers, and green hilltops (and sometimes the adivasis who live among them) as a central way of framing its value to the world. As will be detailed in chapter 5, nearly each one of the many of the Bangladesh “Earth Campaigners” I interviewed referenced pride in their nation as a key reason for being invested in conservation of natural places.



Figure 5 - "Beautiful Bangladesh" cricket campaign -- come explore Bangladesh, including the "Smiling women of Chittagong Hill-tract" (sic.)

Adivasi Exclusion and Inclusion

In this section, I detail some of the history of the ways in which adivasi and minority populations have been alternately excluded and included from the national imaginary in Bangladesh. The long-running conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

⁴⁷ As van Schendel (2009) notes, with the development of secular cultural symbols of nationalism during and following the 1971 war of independence, the combination of “local authenticity with modern appeal” was often articulated with reference to “the delta’s natural beauty and abundance” (189).

(CHT)⁴⁸ in Southeastern Bangladesh, as a site which does not involve the Mandi directly but which contains by far the largest concentrated grouping of adivasis in Bangladesh, has had a profound impact on the debate about adivasi inclusion/exclusion in Bangladesh. In understanding the contours of the “adivasi question” (how to include or exclude ethnic minorities into a national formation) via the Chittagong Hill Tracts,⁴⁹ I also contest the frequent assertion among human rights advocates that secular democracy offers a fundamental solution to the question.

Early colonial frameworks like the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900 functioned as a form of “exclusive governmentality” (Ghosh 2006) and far from granting autonomy, regulated through intense, exclusionary surveillance. Not only were outsiders prohibited from entering the Hill Tracts, but the “savages” were forbidden from cultivating outside land.⁵⁰ So early on, a paradox of conditional protection was set up – under auspices of “protecting” the hill people from Bengali society, the state was able to

⁴⁸ It is important to distinguish between “hill” and “plains” groups in the national rendering of outsiders and insiders to the nation, however this distinction is not always entirely clear. Many of Bangladesh’s adivasi populations occupy border areas and other areas imagined as remote, and the Mandi occupy an interesting status as being “of the hills” across the border in India, while to a large extent “of the plains” in Bangladesh.

⁴⁹ It is useful to situate the beginnings of the historical context for thinking about the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) around the time of its first attempted inclusion under the domain of a “modern” state. Setting the trend for years to follow, border defense was the first major concern of the British colonial state’s operation in the area, and was the justification for military presence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts with British annexation in 1860. With the exception of their border patrol and the demand for a nominal cotton tribute, the British still had few designs in fully appropriating the area, and Bengali entrepreneurs and moneylenders began taking advantage of the people and resources made available in the openings in this newly annexed zone. Seeing this as exploitation, the British decided to intervene, ostensibly for two main reasons: to avoid any chance of rebellion by the discontented minority (as had happened recently with the minority Santals further west) and to curb Bengali accumulation of capital, seen as threatening to the colonial project (van Schendel 2004: 150).

In answer to the problem, the British imposed the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900, which consolidated power among tribal leaders and assigned roles to them in a more administrative, governmental sense, allowing the British to “penetrate more vigorously into the CHT.” One of the provisions which would become most important to the future of the region was that “no person other than...a member of any hill tribe indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts...shall enter or reside within...unless he is in possession of a permit granted by the Deputy Commissioner” (Gain 2000).

⁵⁰ “They had become minorities who had restricted rights in the territory that they had been assigned and were powerless outside it” (van Schendel 2004: 152).

function like a sieve, impassable to any elements it wanted to keep either in or out, but permeable to European entrepreneurship and regulation in the form of “reserved forests” and indirect rule.

Though framed as a protection of tribal rights and culture, the peoples’ very livelihood was threatened as traditional agricultural methods were curtailed at will.⁵¹ In short, by assigning a “special status” to the CHT, the state was able to institute the economic and policing aspects of governance but none of the citizenship benefits, neither welfare nor representation. While extraction of capital without recognition may be unsurprising as a typical colonial model, even subsequent, post-colonial administrations (Pakistani and Bangladeshi) were to follow it, using the region for timber, bamboo, and cotton, and later, hydroelectric power (van Schendel 1994: 154). As a Chakma leader simply put it, the deplorable conditions of Chakma were due to “the use of the resources of the district for the benefit of the other areas” (Gain 1993).

With the Pakistani administration, emphasis shifted from outright exclusion⁵² to a policy claiming to “develop the backward tribal society” in the form of a number of new primary schools and other initiatives (Husain 1999). Here the modality shifts from that of

⁵¹ “The Deputy Commissioner is empowered to control and regulate *jhumming* (swidden cultivation) in the CHTs and to issue and enforce such orders as he considers necessary for the same. He may for sufficient reasons declare any area to be closed to *jhumming* or restrict the migration of *jhumming*” (section 41 of the Regulation, quoted in Gain 1993: 164).

⁵² While apparatuses governing the CHT have variously operated in terms of inclusion and exclusion, often a policy of increased incorporation coincided with panicked policies of nascent administrations and nationhood. The Pakistani government, for example, exercised direct force over many aspects of its East Pakistani wing in the interests of control, and the CHT is no exception. Under the British, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Frontier Police Regulation of 1881 had maintained a separate, local, “indigenous” police force to administer the area, as part of the designation of the CHT as an “Excluded Area,” while the more incorporative policy of the Pakistani administration changed its official designation to “Tribal Area” and integrated the local police into the East Pakistani Police force (Husain 1999). Along with shifts in police administration were “an apparent bid to end the feudalistic arrangements and modernize and mainstream the tribal people into the national life,” a basic orientation that was to persist for the next fifty years, from the Partition of 1947 until the 1997 Peace Accord.

“exclusive governmentality” (a topic to which I will return later),⁵³ to the discourse of “modernization” and development. By framing the discourse in terms of development, the government could justify its increase in oil and gas prospecting, rabid logging, and the incredible devastation wrought by the 1963 completion of the Kaptai Dam, which was to displace more than 100,000 people, and only to be compensated by a meager and ill-conceived rehabilitation program (Husain 1999).⁵⁴

The main period of attempted assimilation of the people and culture of the CHT was during the Bangladeshi nationalist period. Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (in)famously declared “From this day onward the tribals are being promoted into Bengalis” (Mohsin 2003). While this statement was purportedly meant to be a promise for development, it was interpreted by many “tribals” as a request for them to sacrifice their identity (Shelley 1992). At the same time, development initiatives were proposed which implied incredible incorporation at the structural and, implicitly, cultural levels.

In February of 1972, especially in response to increased Bengali migration into the CHT, a delegation led by Chakma separatist leader M.N. Larma presented a newly articulated nationalist vision in the form of a sweeping list of demands directly to Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. As Shelley writes, “but these demands were deemed potentially disruptive and rejected by the Prime Minister, who argued in favour of

⁵³ Strangely somewhat analogous in this context to what would, in late 20th-century human rights discourses, be reframed as “indigenous rights”.

⁵⁴ Along with this development came a level of attempted cultural integration by relaxing the rules on in-migration for Bengalis into the CHT, although that process really came to full fruition after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

subsuming such parochial aspirations under a broader nationalism to facilitate national integration” (1992: 48).⁵⁵

Under increasing empowerment from international organizations interested in establishing peace in the region, in 1987 the PCJSS repeated their demands for autonomy, and though they were again rejected, compromise finally seemed in sight by 1988. The National Committee on the CHT made a nine-point recommendation,⁵⁶ and their recommendations were begrudgingly accepted by tribal elites.⁵⁷

The signing of the 1997 Peace Accord has been characterized by the human rights community as instituting a “hegemonic peace”. It has, in accordance with the demands of the PCJSS, ostensibly given the region an increased amount of autonomy, but was a significant departure from what was requested, including the retention of a massive military presence.⁵⁸ Regarding its adivasi people, Lamia Karim terms the current state of

⁵⁵ The characterization of these aspirations as parochial is bitterly ironic given the narrowing scope of the Bengali nationalist vision itself, but it was clear that in relation to the CHT, the new nation of Bangladesh was going to continue to expand upon the impetus of development, modernization, and incorporation that the Pakistani regime had before it. The outright rejection of any of these demands was the flashpoint where the often-violent tactics of the Shanti Bahini had their start. One not only thinks of the inevitable transformation in terms of the state’s reaction, but also of the further enshrinement of identity that takes place in realms defined openly by physical hostility; of how often “violence and community constitute one another” (Pandey 2001: 5). Many of the most brutal administrative measures have taken place since the “insurgency” of the Shanti Bahini. In *Falconry in the Hills* (1992), a polemical book ostensibly “intended to evaluate the steps so far taken by the Government to ensure socio-economic and political development of the tribal people living in Chittagong Hill Tracts Region” (Belal 1992: 3), a chillingly typical justification of the excessive deployment of security forces by the state is given.

⁵⁶ Including “Identification of CHT districts as special areas” and “Redelimitation of the boundaries of the districts and ‘tribal circles’ to remove any anomaly” (Shelley 1992: 66)

⁵⁷ Although violence continued, negotiations also persevered in the 1990’s, and the CHT became a temporary political football, with then-Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, speaking the language of modernization and democracy, declaring in 1992: “Arms and terrorism cannot bring solution to any problem...we want a political solution to the problem. There is a democratic government now in the country which wishes to resolve all problems politically” (Shelley 1992: 121). However, temporarily ousted from government in 1997, Zia declared that her successor’s 1997 Peace Accord seriously threatened Bangladesh with a “parallel government”.

⁵⁸ “Although the peace accord provides for the withdrawal of such military camps, according to an Amnesty International report,” “there are several hundred non-permanent military camps with some 20,000 soldiers spread all over the Chittagong Hill Tracts.” Despite relative autonomy in various respects, “The members of the armed forces

Bangladesh as acting with “willed ignorance,” a type of exclusion which feigns no knowledge of itself.⁵⁹

However, “willed ignorance” implies both absence of recognition by the state and that it pretends that the people of the CHT do not exist, that there has been no problem. While in some aspects of the *structures* of the state, that argument may be easily made, as described earlier, the Bangladeshi government has been forced to engage with the question of the CHT for some time, as have previous administrative units, most notably by adivasi resistance movements and international human rights organizations. Further, the state has done so overtly, “recognized” the CHT and its people as its own, though in a relegated, minority status.

While Karim frames her argument as a challenge to the illiberalism of the Bangladeshi state, what its stance has often been can be more aptly termed “conditional inclusion,” inclusion offered in a “hyphenated” or partial way, common to liberal democracies. Thus, to imply that the situation is merely one of “willful ignorance” that could be solved by “non-ignorance,” or “recognition,” as Karim suggests, is an oversimplification.⁶⁰

can be deployed under the state rules and procedures in case of deterioration of law and order situation and in times of natural calamities or like other parts of the country under the control of civil administration” (Gain 2000: 9).

⁵⁹ For example, “by refusing to review cases of religious discrimination, the High Court effectively produces a mythology which says that there is no religious discrimination in Bangladesh.”

⁶⁰ What Karim does highlight more effectively, however, is the contradiction engendered by the types of conditional autonomy, the “control” without “rights” that more aptly characterizes the conditional recognition that is taking place. The use of the term “ignorance” may actually apply more readily to the familiar ways in which the state has shown mocked ignorance in the face of human rights claims and attempted to keep its citizens and the outside world out of and in ignorance of the CHT. This could be more aptly termed “imposed ignorance” or “willful disguising”. Further, it would be a misreading to claim that either the political leaders of the CHT or human rights groups have always articulated their concerns by insisting upon “inclusion”.

By shifting to the framework of control, one is implicitly recognizing some measure of “inclusion,” into mechanisms and apparatuses of control. In Foucault’s “governmentality” context of Western Europe this notion is limited to those subtler methods of control. He writes that hegemonic constructs operate primarily (though not exclusively) at the level of inculcation into the individual rather than by the brute force of “the past” (Foucault 1995).⁶¹

Describing his context of native activists in Jharkand, Kaushik Ghosh attempts to go beyond this dichotomy, the mutual exclusivity of the categories “governmentality” and “brute force”. To do so, he introduces a new distinction, which he terms “incorporative governmentality”⁶² versus “exclusive governmentality”. As noted earlier, the CHT has primarily been related to in terms of the exclusion rather than inclusion, in fact wherein the very “principle of recognition is that of exclusion” (Ghosh 2006: 508).⁶³

An important paradox is that the state has used discourses of development and exclusionary security in order to project an interest in adivasi people, which often operates *within* the confines of liberalism. That discourse (while often not actually implemented) accepts as its primary principle that all those within the borders of Bangladesh have equal rights, without regard to recent historical realities, like the protracted insurgency in the CHT, or the flooding of most of Chakma land with the

⁶¹ Here it may be imperative to incorporate a distinction (or non-distinction), as Kaushik Ghosh does, to a common misreading of the complexity of Foucault’s notion of “governmentality”. Ghosh’s reading is that coercion operates not solely in terms of direct force or of state hegemony, but often in a combination of both (Ghosh 2006).

⁶² “bringing the adivasi into the time of capital” and liberal subjecthood through the “process of addressing ethnicity through inclusion” (Ghosh 2006).

⁶³ Herein lies part of the problem with Lamia Karim’s claim of a “willful ignorance” on the part of the state – it under-recognizes this exclusive operation of governmentality which is vital to the state’s management of the CHT situation, being too generous to the state in claiming it has been able to “ignore”.

construction of the Kaptai Dam.⁶⁴ Further, the opposition between “a theocratic state” *or* a state that “will honor and protect all minorities” neglects that this has often been under an ostensibly secular, or at least “religiously tolerant” government (British, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi).⁶⁵

Human rights groups⁶⁶ have published responses to the adivasi question,⁶⁷ and support similar general conclusions. With the abetting of much of the overt violence in the area, and the signing of the Peace Accord, human rights organizations are somewhat powerless to take a clear stance against the Bangladeshi government, in light of its apparent conciliations. However, all agree that little has been done to rectify past wrongs:

⁶⁴ Thus, when Karim states “herein lies the contradiction,” and poses the question as, “Do we assert that Bangladesh will be a theocratic state or that we will honor and protect the rights of all minorities within the state? Do we acknowledge that there are citizens who never received full membership in the state and that there may be legitimate grounds to rethink the founding nationalism of the country?” (Karim 1998: 33), she addresses important concerns about nationalism and state self-definition, but what of that other, more “liberal” and “modern” discourse, which paradoxically provides an exclusive inclusion?

⁶⁵ Probably one of the most prominent and often-debated ways in which the state has spoken the language of liberalism is in the modification of the constitution which states that “all peoples are free to move where they like within the state of Bangladesh,” an obvious go-ahead nod to those looking to resettle in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, or in the forests of Modhupur, where claims to land by tribal peoples were tenuous, at best, in the eyes of the state.

⁶⁶ The International Peace Academy, Amnesty International, Minority Rights Group International, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, the Anti-Slavery Society, and the Society for Environment and Human Development.

⁶⁷ A recent human rights publication by Amena Mohsin (2003) argues that “Through recognizing the CHT as a ‘tribal’ inhabited area, not as the land of a Jumma nation, the state has only reaffirmed the dominance and hegemony of the Bengali ‘nation’ within the state of Bangladesh” (2003: 19). The paper laments the increasing “governmentalization” rather than decentralization in the sweeping powers given to the Deputy Commissioner in a compromise of the 1997 Peace Accord.

Mohsin concludes by pleading for democratization at the “societal and psychological levels” and “nurturance of the civil society.” “Peace in the CHT,” she states, “will remain a chimera unless participatory democratic structures are built, to which the state, the nongovernmental sector, and the international community must contribute” (2003: 202). But does it really hold promise for a group which has continuously articulated its demands for *autonomy* from the state, has been continuously exploited by the non-governmental sector, and has extremely limited access to the international community?

neither addressing displacement, nor effectively dealing with refugee populations, nor providing apologies and reparations for past human rights abuses (Mohsin 2003).⁶⁸

As many have addressed (Karim in this context (1998)), “human rights” discourse often does not address the actual political or specific identity contestations at play.⁶⁹ In emphasizing a citizen-subject, it is often speaking in terms of the state as the provider or arbiter of those rights. The state of Bangladesh, for example, has not always addressed this situation in terms of rights, and if so, is able to use rhetoric of “rights” and development to pacify the international community, reduce the situation’s complexity, and provide limited benefits therein.

As an article by Willem van Schendel (1994) articulates, neither have the people of the CHT always argued for “rights” within the framework of the state. Instead, they have demanded autonomy, even independence at times,⁷⁰ although they have often strategically articulated their cause in terms of human rights in international discourses. It becomes difficult for human rights to really address such a talk of “revolution,” nor anthropologists, for that matter.

⁶⁸ One sees some of the limits of a reparations discourse; in Bangladesh, as in much of the post-colonial world, governments have changed so drastically in such short periods of time that it is easy (and not altogether disingenuous) for the state to claim non-involvement in past abuses.

⁶⁹ Karim articulates some of the limits of human rights discourse by recalling a conversation she had with some feminist human rights activists. One of the women is completely opposed to any kind of protective status for the CHT as, per the constitution, landless peasants should be allowed to migrate there. Another activist says that she could not support such a status either, but that she would support a struggle for an independent nation-state. Both are speaking the language of the state and of equal rights, yet failing to acknowledge the pre-existing disparity in rights or any type of claim outside the framework of the nation-state. Karim concludes that, “For many feminists, Adivasis must be de-territorialized and re-territorialized as new subjects of a democratic state” and pleads that, “The project of democratization of space has to recognize that serious differences exist among and between the subjects of the state, as well as the effect their ideology has on groups of people they are trying to fight for” (1998: 31-33).

⁷⁰ It should be noted that, in terms of space and of place, autonomy in the context of the CHT could be easily bounded and defined, as the CHT can easily be constructed (and is constructed) as a hinterland, a frontier, than in many more ambiguous territorial gestures. Accumulation as investments in adivasi spaces – mainly, hydroelectric power in the form of the Kaptai dam, prospecting for oil and other natural resources, and logging and fruit and rubber plantation in forest spaces like Modhupur; and defense of borders with Burma and India render state security vulnerable.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts are an often-volatile site for approaching questions of the operations of differing forms of governance and governmentality, representation and identity politics, and deployments of different universal and local truth claims by governments, minority populations, and local and international non-government mediators. Moving from this discussion of how “development,” “rights,” and “autonomy,” have been articulated in the region, I discuss adivasi group identity formations like *jumma* relative to their incorporation into a touristic focus on primitivized “indigenous” aesthetics.

Detailing the lead-up to the 1997 Peace Accord, in his 1994 article “The Invention of the ‘Jummas’”, Willem van Schendel describes the articulation of the unified identity of the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a sort of ground-up nationalism. He outlines a history of this nationalism, much of it concurrent with the state actions outlined above, delineating the 1947 independence from and partition of the British colonial state as a moment of increasing coalition among the people of the CHT as they were challenged in newly intense ways as to their identity and political affiliation vis-à-vis the post-colonial state.^{71, 72}

⁷¹ Ellen Bal (2000) follows a similar argument for the self-definition of the Mandis in Bangladesh.

⁷² Although in the British colonial period, a few group-specific (mainly Chakma) organizations had existed, it was just after independence that collective political advocacy groups were implemented. Immediately after the 1971 independence of Bangladesh, “hill people” (which is still often used) started being replaced by the designation “swidden cultivators” (*jumma*), a pejorative term in the Chittagonian dialect of Bangla. The change in the politics of the area which most likely spurred a new sense of nationalism and unity among the hill people was a drastic influx of Bengali immigrants to the area from the newly independent nation-state (1994: 164). Among the *jumma* themselves, however, it is primarily this oppositional identity van Schendel sees articulated in their nationalism, and not any kind of “cultural purification” discourse. Though he posits that both Pakistan’s independence from British rule and, later,

However, the Bangladeshi state, in an official English-language publication *Bangladesh Quarterly*, disclaims any possibility that the *jumma* are native to the area, as it has for the vast majority of Bangladesh's adivasi inhabitants.⁷³ Despite characterization of the current inhabitants of the CHT as both too diverse to be unified and as non-indigenous, the *Quarterly* is rife with essentialized and primitivized depictions of the adivasis, an article appearing nearly every other issue with a familiar discourse of the authenticity and timelessness of these "traditional" people (Hussain 1984: 48).⁷⁴ Every single article on adivasi people foregrounds their dancing, ornamentation, or more general "culture," presenting them as a relic, and ignoring active political participation.⁷⁵ Though drawing on museumized tropes of primitive native peoples, partly via promotion of voyeuristic tourism, this Ministry of Information publication still refuses to recognize these people as "indigenous" in any technical sense.

Between the often-oppositional stances of the Bangladeshi government and the development and rights discourse, there is agreement on the authentic and primitive nature of adivasi people, despite contested origin mythologies. This relegates them to the status of something to be defended or fought over, but not welcome to assert their active agency. Kaushik Ghosh notes this phenomenon of the "neoprimitivist discourse" (2006:

Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan served as models for *jumma* nationalism, van Schendel differentiates *jumma* from the other two as more of a ground-swell nationalism than the earlier movements.

⁷³ "No ethnic groups or existing inhabitants...can claim to be aboriginal or 'sons of the soil'... Besides, the different tribal groups of the region also differ greatly in their socio-cultural and behavioural settings" (Rob 1995:52).

⁷⁴ "Thus, the Chakmas of today carry a sign post of the past. They are like the dim-lit candle still flickering a thin ray of light by means of which we can read the wonderful pageant of their life and the romance with which it is touched. It is a freak of nature that pieces of humanity separated from the rest have developed a culture and traditions of their own which is quite in tune with the surroundings they live in" (Hussain 1984: 48).

⁷⁵ Also almost invariably, the photographs accompanying the articles are of beautiful women in colorful dress. Even the one slightly political article, which mentions the then-nascent Peace Accord, shows only one picture of the people themselves, and it is a group of women in native costume dancing in a soccer stadium.

520).⁷⁶ This trope of quaint victim is particularly curious due to the fact that, for the past several centuries, in various incarnations, adivasi people have been actively engaging with and confronting various sympathetic and unsympathetic powerful actors in various ways.⁷⁷

As van Schendel implies, the contested origins of this group of people may be less relevant than their shared history of struggle and, accepting that argument, the types of claims made by well-meaning indigeneity literature may actually serve to relegate the debate from one about state oppression to one about contested unprovable “origins.”⁷⁸ The over-application of the trope of indigeneity which may have applied more readily to situations of colonialism and cultural domination in the U.S. and Australia do not necessarily apply so readily in India and, further, have not been the primary way in which adivasi groups have managed to make gains.

I now tack back from adivasi history in Bangladesh to look at the question of environmentalism. How do we understand what are environmentalism, its rendering in the post-colony, and its relationship to questions of indigeneity?

⁷⁶ “It is at one level the continuation of a much older discourse of primitivism, the invention of a pristine primitive figure who acts as a persistent critique of a decadent modernity. At another level, however, sutured to the discourse of governance and civil society and the economic reason of globalization, this discourse privileges a metropolitan activist as the sole moral authority in the judgment of third world nation-states in relation to their indigenous populations. This moral authority is pitched in the name of democracy via civil society, but its configurations are such that it does not need to engage with the specific histories and politics of the particular populations involved.” (2006: 520)

⁷⁷ Recent resistance in Modhupur is detailed primarily in chapters 5 and 6.

⁷⁸ “These local contexts can tell us much about the dangers of deploying a transnational discourse of indigeneity without attending to the nature of its specific translations in specific sites. If such struggles have emerged from a historical negotiation by adivasi groups of the modern state and colonial governmentality, then we must pay close attention to how this history articulates with the global discourse of indigeneity” (Ghosh 2006: 502).

Wrangling With the Cultural Specificities of Environmentalism

In this section, I outline the broad problematic of environmentalism, and argue for its import into understanding efforts at conservation in Bangladesh's forest spaces. I start by outlining environmentalism as a cause. Secondly, I dialogue with scholarship which presents "the environment" as either heterogeneous or, alternately, rather homogenous, crucial for understanding the extent to which environmentalism works or does not work in Bangladesh. In outlining environmentalism as a cause, it becomes a stance which is appropriable by organizations, both "non-governmental" and governmental, as will be argued in chapters 2 and 5. Environmentalism, I argue, is an interpretive act and a negotiation, a crucial feature of my ethnographic approach in the dissertation. Finally, I emphasize the possibility of understanding environmentalism as a potential identity and subjecthood, analyzed in detail in chapter 5. Working through strains of scholarship on environmentalism and ecologies, I locate my work as drawing from various strains, but placing emphasis on understanding environmentalism through Michel Foucault's work on governmentality, security, and the milieu.

Environmentalism in Most of the World

The concept of "the environment" could be characterized as an extremely heterogeneous one in post-colonial contexts (Selin 2003: xix; Rival 1998: 5), or could even be characterized as absent (see Latour 2004: 53, for example). This could be seen as presenting a particular challenge to anthropologists and ethnographers who wish to build a critical framework for analyses of "the environment". Yet anthropology thrives on this

type of diversity, on recognizing otherness and of tracking the ways in which particular cultures, worldviews, historical and economic positions manage such concepts (Rival, ed. 1998).

The question and challenge becomes, how are concepts of the environment translated from one context to another (Tsing 2005)? What anthropologists have to contribute are the specificities in which these multiple and overlapping discourses are formed, contested, and translated.⁷⁹ It is vital to recognize the heterogeneity of “environment” as an asset (Latour 2004; Harvey 1996), while discarding the idea that environment is “absent” in the non-West (Latour 2004: 53) as maintenance of an Orientalist-tinged representation.

Environmentalism may not be an everyday priority for much, or, as Partha Chatterjee likes to say “most of the world” (Chatterjee 1999, 2004).⁸⁰ Many post-colonial governments, and certainly their subjects, have far more pressing issues than “concern for the environment” as such as one of their priorities. However, via an international NGO sphere often very invested in environmental concerns, many post-colonial governments and citizens have become engaged in such concern. Further, political ecologists have argued, environment is central to many other issues, such as resource allocation,

⁷⁹ Some scholarship has been able to provide that, (See Tsing 2005 for an analysis of these circulations as “friction”; Agrawal 2005; Li 2000; Dove 1995; and West 2007 for ethnographic examples) and one would hope that with each successive critique, each movement in anthropological theory and trend, we can incorporate more nuance in those arguments. There will always be reactive, polemical arguments (Latour 2004; Argyrou 2005), and those arguments have their place, in instituting wake-up calls to the discipline or in generating thought and engagement. Yet the scholarship which is most valuable and lasting is often that which reconciles multiple positions and theories, which is what newer approaches to political ecology set out to do. (See Orlove (1980); Biersack (1999); Scoones (1999); and Greenough and Tsing (2003) for the evolution of this scholarship.)

⁸⁰ Doane 2007, for example, addresses this problem, detailing a failed attempted integration of environmentalist and land rights concerns among campesinos in Mexico.

economic, development, and human rights priorities (Peet and Watts, ed. 2004).⁸¹ Thus, If we were to suggest that “environment” is often *absent* in the post-colonial world, we would be denying an incredibly diverse range of ways in which the environment is far from absent.⁸² This is certainly not to suggest that one concept of environment or environmentalism is easily translated to another. In contrast, much scholarship has regarded environmental discourses as not quite translatable⁸³ or describes the mistranslations which take place.⁸⁴

Understanding Environmentalism in the Post-Colony

David Harvey’s dialectic take on environmentalism (1996) provides a useful analysis of some various premises and tenets which comprise environmental discourse. Harvey highlights (via Williams and others) the incredible political diversity of environmentalist arguments.⁸⁵ We could view the flexibility of environmental issues as itself part of the reason environmental concerns can be so easily co-opted, by neoliberal

⁸¹ Agrarian environments (Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2007; Mendes 1989), pollution (Alley 1998), water resources (Aiyer 2007, Dubash 1996; Lahiri-Dutt 2008), and industrial catastrophe (Fortun 2001) are just some of the many ways in which post-colonial governments, NGOs, *and* people confront environmental issues.

⁸² Such as in Guha 2000; Harper 2005; Fortun 2001; Tugal 2008; Robbins 2000; Snodgrass et al. 2008; Peets and Watts, eds. 2004.

⁸³ See Doane 2004; Tsing 2005; Baviskar 2003.

⁸⁴ Even if we accept the premise that “environmentalism” is a primarily “Western” construct (Gomez-Pompa and Kaus 1992; see varying accounts of Western environmental history in Beinart 1995; Miller and Rothman 1997; and Tsing 2005), its deployment is far from universal within that West (Ellen 1998, 2003). Politics in the West involve debates not only on what is “the environment” but on whether or not it is even useful to think with. Politics which foreground the environment themselves have a broad diversity (Miller and Rothman 1997).

⁸⁵ Harvey is not arguing that environmentalism spans cultures in multifarious forms, but that the extreme vagueness and flexibility of the (“Western”, and increasingly “global”) concepts of nature and its salvation range from what might be termed extremely right-wing to extremely left-wing positions, and that those positions themselves are rarely stable but rather strategic and transitory.

restructuring programs from environmental justice groups,⁸⁶ or even in the opposite direction of power, by grassroots political organizers from large-scale structural adjustment programs.⁸⁷ In Bangladesh, far from either a homogeneity or a non-existence of environment, each of these forms of environmentalism can be located primarily in different contexts within the environmental “NGOscape”.

If we take “environment” in its common use, we could indeed argue that it is often absent in post-colonial contexts (Latour 2004: 53).⁸⁸ There is much literature to support this view of environmentalism,⁸⁹ Yet scholarship of political ecology, has tried to stray from rendering environmentalism as a “Western” concept,⁹⁰ instead looking at multiple ecologies.

Attempts to recognize an “environment” in the post-colonial world have fallen under two broad headings. One set searches for local conceptualizations of “ecology,” more narrowly in the search for universals and more broadly in the search for respect for difference (Rival, ed. 1998). Another set focuses on colonialism, governmentality,

⁸⁶ See Hartwick and Peet 2003 for the case of the World Trade Organization.

⁸⁷ Harvey breaks down the specificity of the concept into eight broad forms: “Authoritarianism,” particularly characteristic of radical environmentalism of the 1970’s which views the impending environmental crisis as so ominous that drastically controlling measures must be taken accordingly; “Corporate and State Managerialism,” emphasizing capitalist-rational resource management with a more weakened centralized authority from the strictly authoritarian model; “Pluralistic Liberalism,” the idea of consensus through long-term democratic deliberation; “Conservatism,” a belief in traditional reverence for nature rooted in humanity’s past; “Moral Community,” in which communitarian ethics are relied upon for persuasion; “Ecosocialism,” which argues that social stratification and environmentalism are intimately intertwined; “Ecofeminism,” in which symbolic and practical links between oppression of women and the environment are a grounds for argument; and “Decentralized communitarianism,” which emphasizes environmental solutions which are both non-hierarchical and decentralized.

⁸⁸ That is, hegemonic conceptions of environmental politics as deployed in Harvey’s categories, for example, are culturally located in a Western or, at best, cosmopolitan perspective (Harvey 1996 details this philosophical history in the first half of his “The Nature of Environment” chapter). Their deployment in the post-colonial world then becomes already an imposition, of economic dominance in the West’s quest for hegemony euphemized as universalism (Argyrou 2005). Each of Harvey’s categories contains within it this impulse, as each is caged in abstract notions of a known “environment” and a particular politics of how that is to be “saved”.

⁸⁹ Argyrou 2005; West 2007; Tsing 2005; Hughes 2005; Baviskar 2003; Conklin and Graham 1995; Dove 1996

⁹⁰ See Lipschutz 2004 for a critique of strictly top-down approaches to environmentalism.

imperialism, and hegemonic discourse to highlight environment more narrowly as *the* way in which imperialism has been carried out or more broadly as *one of* the ways in which colonialism has been justified (and potentially assuming but not emphasizing “difference”).^{91,92}

We might say that the extent to which authors emphasize *difference* allows them to argue either for the heterogeneity of “environment” (Selin 2003; Rival 1998) in the post-colonial world or its complete absence (Latour 2004). In a sense, these are rhetorical positions which further their critique by emphasizing “environment” or “ecology” in their broad senses as “peoples’ surroundings and how they view and interact with them”⁹³ or in their narrow senses as the ways in which these terms have been used by the West.⁹⁴ The latter and perhaps more important position to investigate nearly unanimously agrees that the primary “difference” we can observe (or perhaps intuitively know) is quite absolute: post-colonial “others” do not draw a distinction between a “nature” and “culture”, between humans and animals, between themselves and their environments (Latour 2004).

The Holistic Native

This logic breaks down in several places. Firstly, it can be seen as rooted in anthropological obsessions of nature versus culture (see Haraway 1991, 1990). That the

⁹¹ Miller (2007); Hughes (2006); Philip (2004); Sachs (2003); Sivaramakrishnan (2003; 2000, 1999, 1995); Boynhady (2000); Broch-Due and Schroeder (2000); Farihead (2000); Grove (1995); and Crosby (1986).

⁹² These sets might be caricatured as “idealist” versus “materialist” debates (Biersack 1999), but local ecologies have been approached both materially and ideologically (both in Rival, ed. (1998)), and imperial environmentalism has been critiqued both as a cultural discourse (Argyrou 2005) and as capitalist accumulation (Harvey 2004; Hartwick and Peet 2003).

⁹³ Orlove 1980; Selin 2003; Rival 1998; Peet and Watts 2004.

⁹⁴ Taken to further their own ends or an unjustifiable and problematic universalism, such as Argyrou 2005 and Latour 2004.

“West” universally views itself in opposition to nature is quite a broad generalization, contradicted partly by deep ecological movements (see Harvey 1996: 179), which may often reference “indigenous” culture but are not strictly rooted in them. Following Ellen (1998, 2003), we can recognize that every system of natural classification is a “folk” biology,⁹⁵ and is not necessarily indicative of the drastic and triumphalist separation from nature lying behind much state-centric, corporate, and colonial projects.⁹⁶ While hegemonic science (Latour 1979) may be more pervasive in the West, it is not the all-encompassing entity referred to by this binary logic. Recognizing this is vital to moving toward a less binaristic conception of global environmentalism, whether that be universals or diverse communities.⁹⁷

Anthropology’s Orientalist (Said 1979) perceptions of the other have, I would argue, sought this as a primary division. Of *course* the native is closer to nature, so goes this logic. Whether denigrated or valorized (Hames 2007), this is one of the primary means by which a fundamental othering is accomplished (Kalland 2003).⁹⁸ Not only does this bring a resolution to a question of native ecology and social organization, but it supports a primary motive of anthropology, the critique and better understanding of one’s

⁹⁵ In contrast to Western scientific biology, which we could easily argue, via Latour and others is also a “folk” biology.

⁹⁶ Fairhead and Leach 2000, Escobar 1995, Mosse 2004.

⁹⁷ These folk biologies exist in the “West” (Ellen 1998; 2003) as much as in the post-colonial world. If we are talking about post-Enlightenment thought, modernity per se, and attendant states and governmentalities, then we can see more clearly where this division becomes so apparent. The vivid imagery of Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (1998) shows this divide.

⁹⁸ What are the origins of the “known” in anthropology that everyone in the non-West makes virtually no distinction between self and surroundings (see, for example Nadasdy 2002)? I would suggest that via a detailed historiographical reading of anthropology (outside the scope of the present concern) one could trace such “fuzziness” to fuzzy ethnographies. Unknowability of the other’s interior mental states has generated a scholarship of not knowing. Ethnographers’ consistent perceptions of “non-distinction” among virtually all “other” groups are, to a large extent, due to ethnographers’ inability to recognize distinction. The otherness of the other is then easily characterized as “fuzziness”; whether seen as negative or positive, the non-Western holistically does not make these marked rational calculations that “we” make (Kalland 2003).

own culture through contrast with an “other” (Latour 2004; Ellingson 2001). Why should it be surprising that the very lacks of which “we” are most prone,⁹⁹ that of community and connection to the environment, are seen to be virtually absent in the constructed other (Harvey 1996, Latour 2004)?¹⁰⁰

There is also the potential pitfall of falling into the camp of arguing against the myth of the “noble savage”.¹⁰¹ Much scholarship on whether or not indigenous people are *really* inherent conservationists has followed in lockstep with knocking down the noble savage myth.¹⁰² Surprisingly un-self-consciously at times (Gibson et al. 2000), this scholarship sets itself in league with those who would displace groups of indigenous people for nature reserves or arguments for a heavy-handed governmentalization of any non-Western development project deemed environmentally unfriendly.¹⁰³ Deconstruction of Romantic mythologies of eco-“noble savagery” should not be accompanied by the neocolonial opposite impulse to represent either the post-colony or native peoples as ecologically profligate in their supposed naïveté.

⁹⁹ According to humanistically-minded social scientists, Conway et al. 1999, for example.

¹⁰⁰ One rebuttal is that “modernity” was epistemically quite different than the cultures and communities of most of the world (Argyrou 2005, Harvey 1996), and the other is that when that modernity and capitalism were visited upon the other in the form of colonialism and imperialism has been typically in a severely violent and exploitative fashion. Nothing I have said disputes either of those points. What I am emphasizing is a casual analysis which pervades a variety of positions on environmentalism in the West (Harvey 1996) but also is grounded in anthropology of the non-Western world (Kattak 2003). Can we really accept that every “other,” from enslaved African-Americans (Stewart in Glave and Stoli 2006) to Brahmanic philosophers (Bilemia 1995 in Cooper and Palmer; Coward 2003) to Mexican campesinos (Bonfil-Batalla 1990) to the people of the Arctic (Nuttall 1998) to the people of the Southeast Asian rainforest have all “not drawn a clear distinction between humans and nature”?

¹⁰¹ Ellingson (2001) argues that there is no myth of the noble savage per se (I would dispute that without refuting his overall point) but rather, a myth of the myth of the noble savage. The “noble savage myth”, he argues, was set up as a sort of straw man with which to vociferously contest actual nobility of natives as a Romantic representation.

¹⁰² See Hames 2007 for a review; also Krech 2005 for an exploration of this debate in relation to Native Americans; for an entire volume of inquiries into whether various peoples live sustainably or not, see Gibson, McKean, and Ostrom 2000.

¹⁰³ Reviews of such publications in Hames 2007; Hanson 2007; Hughes 2005, 2006; Stronza 2001; West and Carrier 2004; West, Igoe and Brockington 2006.

Practical Ethnography

Ethnographic data, of the more materialist, psychological, and semiotic bends suggest enormously complex systems of classifications (as we should expect) from “forest people”.¹⁰⁴ In contrast to either deconstructionist viewpoints of culture (Argyrou 2005) or the basic anthropological assumption that “non-moderns” do not define themselves in distinction to nature, more positivistic sciences like psychology (Cowie 2002) have endeavored to try to verify whether that is actually true.¹⁰⁵

One of the more creative and self-conscious deployments of native species cataloguing is used by Anna Tsing (2005). A list dictated to her by Uma Adang, a Meratus Dayak, lines the margins of a chapter entitled “This earth, this island Borneo [Biodiversity as a multicultural exercise]”, as well as covering inserts at the beginning and end of the book, both appearances standing for something, meaning something, but not intending to be used as a catalogue as such. Instead, the lists frame Tsing’s commentary and pondering on collaboration between indigenous people and environmentalists. She admits that even the “seemingly innocent” practice of list-making potentially reinforces stereotypes, or alternately, makes this knowledge available for capitalist appropriation.¹⁰⁶ Yet Tsing looks to collaboration¹⁰⁷ as a more optimistic angle

¹⁰⁴ See Ellen on palms and cross-cultural prototypicality of trees; Fernandez on trees in the moral imagination; Bonnemere 1998 on New Guinea forest products; Giambelli on coconut species differentiation in Bali; Uchiyamada on “Kaavu” in Kerala; all from Rival (1998) volume.

¹⁰⁵ Roy Ellen (2003) posits some potentially basic features of species knowledge, taken from a number of sources based in modular theories of the mind. These are: “a species-like concept”; a distinction between living and non-living matter; intuition of behaviors based on “phylogenetic similarities”; and ways of classifying discrete biological entities (47).

¹⁰⁶ A topic explored extensively in an edited volume by Brush 1996.

of critique she sees as under-utilized, both in anthropologists' and literary critics' deconstructions of stereotypes of indigenous people and in political ecologists' emphasis on the history of colonialism. The problem she sees in partly one of malaise, of disenchantment with any kind of positive politics of conservation.¹⁰⁸

Newer Political Ecologies

Where a more optimistic approach like Tsing's may fall short is in its lack of emphasis on the effects of colonialism.¹⁰⁹ A more contemporary problem which is under-emphasized in more universalistic, optimistic approaches to anthropology of environmentalism (Little 1999) is the power of neo-liberal deflection and appropriation in managing the environmentalist critique (Hartwick and Peet). Another problem, as argued by Kottak (1999), is that the "old" ecological anthropology¹¹⁰ was steeped in structuralism and assumptions of homeostatic environments. In contrast, he suggests, newer approaches give far more weight to the politics of environments, as well as utilizing a more nuanced and power-laden culture concept which gets away from culture as a tool for eco-adaptation and centers it as a field of mediation.¹¹¹

Arturo Escobar (1999) outlines these more power-aware and development-oriented theorizations of nature, detailing an approach which incorporates several

¹⁰⁷ Not, I would note, as entirely unproblematic or divested of power differentials.

¹⁰⁸ These perspectives "offer a historical metanarrative of imperial modernization in which nothing can happen—good or bad—but more of the same" (161). In contrast, Tsing wishes to turn critiques of globalization on their head. Tsing (2005, 2000) seeks to reclaim globalization "enthusiasm" for purposes of justice.

¹⁰⁹ Elaborated by Miller (2007); Hughes (2006); Philip (2004); Sachs (2003); Sivaramakrishnan (2003; 2000, 1999, 1995); Boynhady (2000); Broch-Due and Schroeder (2000); Fairhead (2000); Grove (1995); and Crosby (1986).

¹¹⁰ Which he locates mainly in the 1960's, but I would argue many of its tendencies persist through today.

¹¹¹ See similar arguments in favor of the increasing complexity of the field of political ecology as reviewed in Orlove (1980); Biersack (1999); Scoones (1999); and Greenough and Tsing (2003).

dimensions to the problem of political ecology. He sets up three categories as points of departure. The first is “Capitalist”, which includes what we might deem Romantic nature, nature as conceptualized in Foucault as governmentality operating on “the natural”, “third nature”,¹¹² and the logic of the market being fused with ecological concern.¹¹³ The “Organic” includes studies of the ethnography of local knowledge (Selin 2003; Rival 1998), which often emphasize a non-separation between nature and culture, human and non-human.¹¹⁴ The third is a techno-scientific view of nature, nature as explored by Donna Haraway (1991, 1990), for example, and the ways in which science can be re-appropriated to be liberating rather than limiting our prospective possibilities (Latour 2004). Via this recombination of viewpoints, Escobar argues, we can look toward a more open and non-judgmental dialogue between proponents of nature as constructed (constructivists) and nature as natural law (realists).¹¹⁵

Exemplary of the kind of detailed and nuanced analysis incorporating studies of discourse and power, as well as non-judgmentally integrating the logic of Capitalist, Organic, and Techno-Scientific environmental rationalities, Arun Agrawal (2005) offers

¹¹² Hughes (2005) conceptualizes “first nature” as a nature apart from humans, “second nature” as anthropogenic nature including humans, and “third nature” envisioned as habits constructed ideally for wildlife.

¹¹³ See Hartwick and Peet for a treatment of neoliberal nature.

¹¹⁴ I argue earlier that although the currently “global”, often capitalist conception of nature is both particular and aspires to the universal, yet there is a universalism and an implied teleology (of “the past” way in which nature was perceived), proclaiming that all or nearly all “pre”- or “non”-capitalist cultural formations were the same in this respect. We could assuage this gloss by calling it a tendency instead of a near-universal social fact, but even so, the idea that outside of the West no one conceptualized a distinction between human and wider non-human contexts is a very blanket statement. It is not hard to fathom, however, that widely *divergent* views could be generally conceived of as qualitatively distinct from a capitalist conception as we know it. However, Escobar puts it specifically that: universally, “Nature and society are not separated ontologically,” (7), a viewpoint which I argue rests partially on a type of ecological noble savagery, and partially on New Age ecological aspirations which are self-critical of the West’s more ecologically destructive impulses.

¹¹⁵ Through this, he looks toward a final disembodiment of nature as a realm of the pristine, authentic, and separate as part of the legacy of state control, while incorporating aspects of that discourse into its critique.

an account of practice, governmentality, and subjectivity in a post-colonial context.¹¹⁶ Agrawal traces environmental subject formation in Kumaon, India by locating diverse social practices which are both heavily informed by environmental governmentality and participate in and against them.

It would be easy to malign any movement for “ecological justice,” even while incorporating “social justice,” as fundamentally power-laden and neocolonial. While this caricature of environmentalism may be to some extent deserved, the complexities of ethnographies like West’s, Agrawal’s, and Li’s, and the optimism of Tsing and Escobar, remind us to be skeptical of the skepticism, to explore the power of powerful discourses both from the top down and the ground up. It is here that I locate my work, in which I detail ethnographically some of the operations of “environment” and “nature preservation” on the ground level. As I will show in Chapter 5, global environmentalism, natural spaces as part of national pride, and local priorities, needs, and interpretations interact in unpredictable and strange ways as part of a larger project of transformation to manageable and securitized paradigms of governance.

A more effective management apparatus continues to be sought in new ways in Modhupur, through attempts to imbue locals with an environmental subjecthood, to capitalize on renderings of native concern for nature and indigenous cache, and in

¹¹⁶ See also Paige West’s (2007) *Conservation is our Government Now* for a Foucaultian take on conservation in a post-colonial context, the justifications, assailments, miscommunications, and other “frictions” which characterize conservation and development efforts.

transformations to “environmentally-friendly” livelihoods. These will be detailed in later chapters.

In the next section, I detail environment as a governmentality, which is being promoted by both the NGO sector and, increasingly, by the Forest Department. I argue that Foucault’s notion of milieu is crucial to understanding this operation, and emphasize environmentalism as a potential practice of government, not merely an ideology. I tackle the question of the extent to which environmentalism represents a break with other modern governmental practices. Finally, I return to the question of subjecthood insofar as the governmental practice of environmentalism hinges on Foucault’s notion of the biopolitical subject.

Questioning Universals and Security in the Milieu

The governmentality of environmentalism¹¹⁷ will be rendered ethnographically in chapter 5, as I describe the close interaction between several powerful elements. Those are, firstly, Integrated Protected Area-Co-Management, a USAID-funded organization which has been instrumental in setting up a nature park system in Bangladesh and is now primarily engaged in transforming governmental practice through “alternative income generation” programs. Secondly is the Bangladesh forest department, who IPAC is working with closely to reform it from an institution of protection and control of forests

¹¹⁷ First, we can understand governmentality not necessarily as a cohesive whole, but in terms of *governmentalities*. Second, we can view governmentality as a way of viewing power and of doing business, and not any specific programme; it need not refer to the totality of processes at any given scale. Third, we can accept that one need not view the current over-arching paradigm of global government, Western government, American government, or any other government (meaning, again, not only state, but all those adjuncts which comprise governmentality) as operating most characteristically via environmentalism.

to a “co-management” model. Third are young activists and environmentalists who articulate means by which urban and rural subjecthoods might be re-shaped to fit with an environmentalist governmentality.

Agrawal’s *Environmentality* (2005), referenced earlier, uses a Foucauldian style of analysis to describe a governmentality, yet there are implications for the broader governmental relevance of environmentalism. Following Foucault, Agrawal offers an answer to the question of how environmentalism can operate as a governmentality, focusing ethnographically and historically on Kumaon, India.¹¹⁸ Agrawal approaches environmental governmentality through three elements: knowledge-power (discourse), institutional apparatuses, and human subjectivities (14-16). Together, he argues, these comprise “environmentality”.

In delineating the governmentality of the environment, Agrawal first focuses on the technologies of surveying, mapping, and cataloguing which developed in the 19th century and were crucial to constructing the environment as a manageable, governable space.¹¹⁹ Agrawal argues that the representation of forests statistically was not inevitable, but can instead be located in the specific means by which the classificatory apparatus was constructed. Forests became constituted as resources utilized by man, a premise which

¹¹⁸ Agrawal argues that theoretical deployments of Foucault have focused mainly on governmental institutions and ideologies themselves, while comparatively few scholars have focused on processes of subject formation in conjunction with these institutions (12). To that end, his study centers around an ethnographic component.

¹¹⁹ The science of statistics, as Foucault argues, allows the obsessive cataloguing of things in government to create a science of government, of population, which for Agrawal is able to make the forests, like urban spaces, governable. This science of statistics differs from earlier, more descriptive cataloguing in the vein of natural history; though natural history rested on endless classification and categorization, it was the hard science of numbers that allowed for “governance” of the forests (2005: 37-9). Agrawal’s writing here closely follows the logic of Foucault, who notes that, what is perhaps most fundamental to the transition to governmentality, population, is paralleled in the transition from natural history to biology. (He locates “population” in the shift from study of “wealth to political economy” and “general grammar to historical philology” as well.) (2007: 77-8)

comes under scrutiny to some degree with the coming of environmentalism (explored later).¹²⁰ Prevailing governmental truth, institutionalized in the Forest Council Rules of 1931, came to understand this localization of control as a manageable and efficient means of government (2005: 103).¹²¹

Agrawal describes in detail what he terms the “regulatory communities” of contemporary forest governance, its village-level decision-makers and participants. In contrast to Foucault’s descriptions of disciplinary apparatuses like the punitive city in *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Agrawal describes the participatory nature of the village forest regulation, in which a diffuse and disperse power tolerates dissent and negotiation (2005: 128).¹²² Agrawal traces environmental subject formation in Kumaon by locating diverse social practices which are both heavily informed by environmental governmentality and which participate in and against them.¹²³ Agrawal argues that when villagers participate (even with skepticism) in forest councils and other environmental

¹²⁰ Agrawal proceeds to identify shifts in which, in response to villager protest as well as practical considerations, the large-scale management of an increasingly unwieldy forest regime was gradually shifted to a more dispersed governance.

¹²¹ Foucault would describe this trend in the science of government as toward acting on the givens and the naturals, the averages and the trends in the space of government (2007: 33). In other words, where earlier forest management had concentrated more on constructing an artificial space of governance for forests, later, security-based governmentality would understand forests and villagers alike as existing in the “milieu”, from which intervention could proceed on givens rather than forcing its own regulations at every step.

¹²² Foucault, in his Security lectures, would go on to describe the predictive nature of such a system of power, and how it works on normation, locating averages and denoting an acceptable level of deviance from that average rather than working toward a strict normalization, conformity to an artificial norm (2007: 63).

¹²³ Environmental subjectivities are often inculcated when “one set of actors, by deploying a combination of resources, convinces another that the goals and problems of the two are linked and can be addressed using joint strategies” (2005: 193).

regulatory bodies, they come to view the “environment” as a resource in need of protection, becoming, in a sense, environmental subjects.¹²⁴

What I want to trace, however, are more specifics about the ways in which the knowledge-power, the truth production, of environmentalism itself has been articulated. I appreciate Agrawal’s focus on subjectivities and on institutions, and those subjectivities can only be understood in particular contexts, like the context Agrawal has traced. In fact, as Agrawal shows in his example, these three levels of analysis are intimately connected. Agrawal shows how actual practices, not just ideologies, how village-level actors, not just top-down bureaucracies, are negotiators in governmental power. This is, indeed, the lines along which my ethnography, particularly in chapter 5, will proceed.

As detailed in chapter 5 (and 4 as well) of this dissertation, there are several avenues by which environmental subjecthood is being encouraged in Bangladesh’s forest spaces. While I retain skepticism about whether or not the “awareness-raising programs” and management councils implemented in Bangladesh’s forest spaces succeed at transforming people into “environmental subjects”, participants are to some degree interpellated into a position of understanding the environment as a priority. In Modhupur, what I found most frequently voiced as an understanding of the importance of environment were 1) natural spaces as important to the nation, 2) environmental conservation as combating natural disaster (ostensibly wrought from climate change), and

¹²⁴ Agrawal effectively uses a Foucauldian analysis to analyze systems of colonial and post-colonial forest governance. He highlights the specifics of knowledges, institutions, and subjectivities which comprise environmental governmentality, or environmentality. He describes the production of “environment” in a particular setting, and his analysis is a much more fluid and convincing presentation than top-down models of ideology, beliefs, and identities being meted under a monolithic abstraction of power.

3) operations of shame in being branded a “thief” of forest resources by one’s community. However, I argue that it is crucial to try to understand the ways in which the regime of truth of environmentalism has developed. I will use Foucault’s own material as well as insights by anthropologists Vassos Argyrou and Anna Tsing to further trace environmental logic, and its potential governmentality.

In *The Logic of Environmentalism*, Vassos Argyrou classifies environmentalism as “without a doubt an ontological transformation of the highest order” (2005: 38).¹²⁵ Argyrou starts with U.N. documents illustrating a shifting view of the environment in an international sphere, then moves on to various environmentalist and anti-environmentalist writings to examine their logic. His further project, though he denies this to some extent, is to expose the fallacy of environmentalism, to argue it is an ill-founded justification for just another renewal of global north-south power dynamics, based on an ever-universalizing logic.

Leaving aside implied questions of motive, “fallacy” or not, environmentalism does discursively relegate the south to backward once again. In a sense though, Argyrou’s argument is that it is an enormous break but is also just an extension of the logic of modernity, the “logic of the same”.¹²⁶ What may be more useful in understanding

¹²⁵ He goes on: “It is a radical change in the meaning of both the physical and human world, an event that heralds the emergence of a new ‘physics’ and a new ‘anthropology’ and, therefore, also a new order of things.”

¹²⁶ I would not directly dispute that claim either (if we take modernity strictly, as Argyrou does, as universalism, or global humanism). However, Argyrou’s argument, in a sense, understands the “logic” of environmentalism as a sort of unchanging ideology.

the “break” is to view its governmentality, and its processual nature.¹²⁷ Indeed, as my ethnography will demonstrate, what seems most crucial in forest spaces like Modhupur, is that environmentalism provides something of a rubric for development work – while it may not succeed at the goal of completely transforming locals’ views of a “human being in nature”,¹²⁸ it provides a goal and project legible both to donor funding avenues and to locals familiar with “green” objectives.

While projects like those of Bangladesh’s “Earth Campaigners” (detailed in chapter 5) often aspire to change people’s lifestyle and consumption habits (termed environmental damage “mitigation”), the majority of projects at the national level aim for “security”, a term often coupled in “food security”, but increasingly visualized in environmental terms. In the security paradigm, the focus is instead “adaptation to” rather than mitigation of environmental damage – adaptation via strengthened levies and

¹²⁷ How would using the lens of Foucault’s “regime of veridiction” change such an analysis? How does the broader logic of neoliberalism inform current environmentalism? How radical and new is this “man as human being” to which Argyrou refers? In other words, what is the nature of the regimes of power in which environmentalism is implicated, in terms of their operations, which comprise the context in which environmentalist logic is fomented and implemented, or contested? This may be a more productive question than dramatically viewing environmentalism as a complete revolution of Western culture and man’s relationship to man and the environment.

¹²⁸ Argyrou spends much of the rest of the book arguing that this “human being in nature” as opposed to “man versus nature”, though a rupture, is not a complete undermining, but an extension of what he calls “the same” in the cultural logic of modernity. His critique lies in exposing the arrogant fallacy behind the West’s logic, “science,” and the like, cultural specificity to the supposed universals underlying Western hegemonic practices. The fact that the logic of environmentalism operates through universals may be characteristic of modernity, but this is merely environmentalism’s form. What better helps to understand environmentalism’s emergence is the way in which it rests upon practices of power which have developed in the West through forms of liberalism and to the contemporary forms of what Foucault called an “apparatus of security,” the main paradigm of modern governmentality. Undoubtedly, this governmentality uses universalism as one of its claims to truth, but this is not its sole source of persuasion, and certainly not of operation.

embankments and moving transient populations off of vulnerable *chor* (temporary silt islands) spaces.¹²⁹

From this security paradigm, I argue that the notion of *milieu*¹³⁰ is central to understanding how governmentality constructs and conceives of “the natural world” envisioned by development organizations in Bangladesh. This is not to say that intervention is necessarily any less under such a system of governance, but simply that the discourse, the logic by which “security” apparatuses proceed is by acting on given “naturals”. This logic is in concert with the stated aims of Integrated Protected Area Co-Management (detailed throughout the dissertation, but primarily in chapter 4) which in their “co-management” model aspire to construct a circular, more “accountable” system of government which is less protectionist and less adversarial among “stakeholders” and their local environmental resources.

Whether or not there are pre-existing subjectivities in Bangladesh forest spaces like Modhupur which render a transition to completely environmental subjecthoods, in focusing on environmentalism as governmental practice, we can both better understand its operation and understand environmentalism as something understood and deployed by local actors who are interacting with this governmental practice. As such, peoples’

¹²⁹ An irony arising from this is that Bangladeshis have long since been adapting to weather patterns and cyclical flooding in the delta. Cycles of rice agriculture, the use of yearly-flooded field as fisheries, and the use of *chor* silt islands themselves, are all examples.

¹³⁰ Through three successive examples of urban planning modalities, Foucault argues that under a paradigm of sovereignty, “territory” is the field of intervention; under a disciplinary mechanism, an artificially structured space comprises that field; while under a security apparatus, it is “the milieu”. What Foucault means by a milieu is a far more flexible and nuanced field than the more “artificial” frameworks of territory and structure which operate under sovereign and disciplinary modalities, respectively (2007: 20). Artificial here, it should be noted, refers not to the reality or non-reality of the respective constructions, nor to the work required to maintain such fields of intervention, but rather to the ways in which these paradigms are managed, through logic and discourse about “natural” givens and processes or on “artificially”-created structures.

relationship to such a discourse, as grand a proposition as it might be, is far from universal.

Foucault highlights the non-universality of universals not in exposing their hypocrisy via cultural imperialism, but in tracing the history of the present, the truth regime which sustains them, via what they actually do. Foucault outlines this method in his second *Biopolitics* lecture (2008). In discussing the increasing importance of the market in the 18th century, he refers to imbuing a jurisdictional system with the qualities of a veridictional system.¹³¹ As such, environmentalism appears not as a mere instantiation of modernity as universalism, but as a truth regime which appeals to universalist logic.¹³²

What Argyrou refers to as the fragility of the “environment” as opposed to the prior, steadfast “nature” construct, is also integrally discussed in Foucault’s lectures on biopolitics (2007; 2008). What regimes of veridiction allow for the fragile environment to become a threat? In his third *Security, Territory, Population* (2007) lecture, Foucault outlines the notions of case, danger, risk, and crisis, particular to apparatuses of security. He uses disease as his example (extremely relevant in Bangladesh), but the concepts offer insights into the way in which notions of environmental crisis proceed.

¹³¹ “The constitution of a particular right of truth on the basis of a legal situation, the law and truth relationship finding its privileged expression in discourse, the discourse in which law is formulated and in which what can be true or false is formulated.” Regimes of veridiction are “not a law of truth, but the set of rules enabling one to establish which statements in a given discourse can be described as true or false” (35).

¹³² Foucault sees the transformation to a discourse of the “human being” as a key one in the history of thought. Foucault, however, locates this transition not in the late 1960s, but much earlier, or at least the seeds of such a transition. In fact, the “human being” is at the crux what Foucault calls “biopower”. Specifically, he calls this the ways in which the biological facts of the human species became the object of political strategy starting from the eighteenth century (1990).

The security apparatus can establish the risk (2007: 60), and from the notions of case¹³³ and risk follow the element of danger. Here is where these specific (yet generalizable) statistical formulations take an ever broader form. Whole pockets of risk, whole populations, and whole series of cases can be identified as dangerous. Finally, there is the crisis, the sudden increases in danger which demand “a higher, natural mechanism,” or “artificial mechanism” in order to drastically mitigate their effects (2007: 61). That danger and crisis are two key elements of the discourse on environmentalism is obvious.¹³⁴

Foucault returns to the theme of danger in the third of his *Biopolitics* series. Expanding on his earlier reflections on the security society, Foucault holds that in liberalism, individuals are “conditioned to experience their situation, their life, their present, and their future as containing danger” (2008: 66).¹³⁵ This is a whole subjecthood, in which the world is experienced as containing danger, which also entails ways of managing threats, reasons for quantifying phenomena, and ways of relating to other individuals.¹³⁶

¹³³ The “case” is an individualized occurrence of a collective phenomenon, a way of evaluating a larger problem based on a quantifiable instance (60).

¹³⁴ Environmentalist literature is rife with apocalyptic imagery. Foucault refers to this crises’ similarity to apocalypse briefly, simply mentioning that these everyday dangers are far different than the “horsemen,” who “disappear”. The primary way in which subjecthood is realized and power exerted is through the mechanism of security. This can be realized in the case of environmentalism when apocalyptic environmentalism is dismissed as radical or fringe environmentalism, while effective management of the environment is considered common sense.

¹³⁵ Arguing that the state remains in power by maintaining a culture of fear may start to sound like phobia of the state, which Foucault explicitly writes against (2008: 76). However, it is important to keep in mind that Foucault is writing about systems of power much broader and more diffuse than the state.

¹³⁶ These elements of danger contribute to Foucault’s broader argument about “security”. How does security differ from, say, a strictly disciplinary mechanism of power? Rather than trying to conform phenomena to a strict norm (what Foucault calls “normation”), a mechanism of security locates various curves of normality, and seeks broadly to manage them in relation to each other (2007: 63). This normalization is, in a sense, more flexible than normation, but

I argue that it would be impossible to conceive of an “environmentalism” or even an environment under mechanisms of power which are strictly sovereign or disciplinary.¹³⁷ Environmentalism involves a biopolitical governmentality, a species-level management of dangerous cases of risk in order to avert crisis. These are the primary lines along which IPAC, Bangladesh’s Forest Department, broader environmental and climate change panic, and young Climate Scientists argue for “environmentalism’s importance. Climate change and environmental damage represent a major case of crisis and danger for the nation and its citizens, while the style of intervention most appropriate is to work within the Bangladesh “milieu” on its natural givens to alleviate risk.

In the next section, I return to the question of indigeneity which, in many cases, rests to a large extent on a question of subjecthood relative to nature interrogated above.

Indigeneity and the Myth of the Myth of the “Eco-Noble Savage”

[T]he current concern about biodiversity in a globalizing world has in the last instance pinned its hope on some so-called 'tribal' practices. Biodiversity, of course, is a promise of multiple local species surviving by local choice, in the face of the predominantly monoculturist, industrial demand for only fast-growing and immediately marketable species in nature. But also, biodiversity is the promise of multiple lifestyles in the face of a universal, homogenized consumerism - based on obsolescence and waste – which is pressed into the service of global capital today... And in this politics of resistance against global capital, the exemplary instance is seen as the practice of maintaining 'sacred groves' which is found amongst some Adivasi societies in India.... [S]acred groves are meant to be forest patches deliberately conserved by 'tribal' peoples, where multiple plant species are maintained for a diversity of uses, economic, medicinal and cultural, and where the community's collective interest and identity are vested. In this vision of an alternative life, sacred groves appear as the repository of a free, collective and future-oriented politics in the middle of the mainstream, just as at one time the imagination of a

also extremely restrictive, as it increasingly seeks to account for all phenomena under its regime of management (not an “artificial” regime of control).

¹³⁷ Here is where we can understand more deeply what Argyrou is gesturing toward with his analysis of man controlling nature versus the human being in nature. Is environmentalism a romanticism of nature? Yes, but it is not the only romanticization of nature. Is environmentalism acting on nature? Yes, but it is far from “man against the elements,” as Argyrou ably shows.

revolutionized liberated zone in the midst of class/patriarchal society had inspired many left movements. (Banerjee 2006: 108-9)

In this section, I argue that ideas about nature find their outlet in indigeneity politics in Bangladesh not simply because of geographical coincidence – forest people live in forest spaces – but also because of this understanding of indigeneity as having political potential for environment. This partly rests on the history of eco-noble savagery representations. Undoubtedly, the discourse rendered by NGOs, human rights, development, and forest department draw in the abstract in colonially and anthropologically-derived notions of why the indigenous is particularly well-suited to a security paradigm of environmentality. In fact, the environmental paradigm is a way of appropriating what may be viewed as a threatening indigeneity into a knowable and securitizable indigeneity. Coupled with forms of capital and a governmentality paradigm, then, the environment becomes an in-road into a management of indigeneity. As I will detail in chapter 4, IPAC (perhaps the most influential environment-development NGO in Bangladesh) explicitly states that it is using environment as a framework around which people can coalesce, to become integrated into its vision of cooperative governmental management practices and entrepreneurially-fashioned capitalist markets.

What I emphasize in this section is that politics which argue for an inversion of the more primitive or less powerful (than majority, mainstream identity) may be missing some of the ramifications of the pluses and minuses of an “indigenous slot” (Li 2000). How do liberal ideas (espoused in Bangladesh by NGOs and the secular left) mis-recognize the importance of this indigenous slot? This placement is what IPAC is trying to achieve – here is your acceptable slot. At the same time, indigenous people are not

mere pawns in this system. Rather, indigenous leaders are often appropriating and reinterpreting indigeneity, using and manipulating the slot.

The Myth

Ter Ellingson, in an extensive monograph on *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (2001), traces the Western literature on “savagery” from its earliest colonial vestiges through 18th century Romanticism, to racist anthropology and up to the present day. Much of what he finds is well-known, not only to scholars, but to a wider literate public, that colonialism, racism, and othering both sought and justified themselves by constructing representations of “primitive” others against which standards of decency and progress could be measured.¹³⁸ Though these explicit representations have fallen out of favor in popular discourse and anthropology alike, they continue to haunt anthropology’s self-image, and those people defined by this history of scholarship as “primitive” continue to be anthropologists’ primary subjects of study. Further haunting are the ways in which popular discourse especially, but anthropology also,¹³⁹ have incorporated sustained critiques of these representations and critiques of their power-laden

¹³⁸ See Taussig (1987) for “wildness” and colonial violence; Banerjee (2006) for the relationship between the constitution of the “historical” and the “primitive” in colonial Bengal; van Schendel (2002) for the nudity as primitive in 20th-century Bangladesh; Rosenblatt (1997) for appropriation of ideas of the “primitive” in San Francisco counter-culture.

¹³⁹ Colonial mentality, even territorially-defined nation-states themselves, require this type of racism (Foucault 2003) to sustain their ideological and policy commitments, and this obsessive categorization and othering continues to this day. While it is important establish a categorical difference between nations who were historically on the dominating side of colonialism and those who were the objects of it, this type of othering can be seen to persist in an anxiety to find a politically-correct way to address the West’s perennial “other” nations: “Third World,” “Fourth World,” “Underdeveloped,” and “Developing” all carry a similar impulse. In fact, development discourse is one of the largest policy projects in which this hierarchy persists: others must be “developed” to bring them into the present “time” (Escobar 1995, 1998, 1999, 2001).

assumptions into their explicit language, while retaining similar analyses, imagery, and affect.¹⁴⁰

An imagined “modern, liberal, educated, wealthy, cosmopolitan” subject (the typical “us” in contradistinction to the indigenous) is not merely constituted as “superior” to an imagined “indigenous person” in every discourse, though power relations between the two have historically been so asymmetrical. Rather, in contemporary frameworks of indigeneity politics, indigeneity is often rendered “superior” in terms of “diversity”, cultural capital, or moral high ground (Muehlenbach 2001). Further, it is not necessarily universal that a given indigenous individual is disadvantaged in terms of economic capital or power, as we will see for some middle-class Mandis and other adivasis. Nonetheless, we would remiss to say that the existence of people who are middle-class, cosmopolitan,¹⁴¹ and indigenous has seriously threatened the pervasive power asymmetries between indigenous and non-indigenous in various world contexts. However, what I emphasize in this section is that a key facet of indigenous identity politics (and adivasi identity politics) rests on pre-formed ideas of an indigenous subject which come partially from colonial historical and anthropological imaginaries of the wild. In turn, these create available “slots” (Li 2000) which indigenous people make use of, contest, or manipulate in the world.

¹⁴⁰ Bonfil-Batalla (1996) makes rhetorical use of this anthropological imagery in arguing for resistance to cultural assimilation to the U.S. in Mexico.

¹⁴¹ See discussions of indigeneity as cosmopolitanism in Bolivia in Goodale (2006); Canessa, ed. (2005).

The Myth of the Myth of the Noble Savage¹⁴²

Ellingson considers the *exposé* of what has become such a common-sense concept in popular discourse, and less explicitly in scholarship, to be vital. A further problem, Ellingson argues, is that the concept is fluid enough to denigrate virtually any positive representation of designated “others” suspected to harbor some amount of primitiveness: peasants, aboriginals, Indians, *adivasis*, and virtually any non-Western peoples. For Ellingson, the myth is a stain on the discipline which should be expunged.

In polemically emphasizing the fallacy of the Noble Savage construct, however, Ellingson neglects an important point. What needs to be emphasized is that the myth of the myth of the noble savage, the historical fallacy of attributing to nineteenth-century Romanticism and other accounts of “soft primitivism” which purportedly laud the virtues of native peoples by constructing a paradoxical “noble savage”, is that romanticism of the “more primitive” other is yet extremely pervasive.¹⁴³ “Culture” then becomes a knowable

¹⁴² Ter Ellingson’s *Myth of the Noble Savage*, as mentioned above, traces some of the history of the “savage” construct. The book’s main focus, however, might more appropriately be termed, “the myth of the myth of the noble savage,” in that it traces the concept as being far less pervasive than is commonly assumed, if existent at all. Ellingson makes short work of exposing the fallacy that Rousseau, to whom it is most commonly attributed, coined the term or was even particularly invested in any kind of valorization of native peoples. He traces the term “Noble Savage” to early 17th-century traveler Marc Lescarbot, though Ellingson interprets his use of the term literally (as in “the Nobility”), as Lescarbot was particularly fascinated by the fact that the common Indian engaged in hunting and war, activities then in Europe confined to the nobility. Lescarbot does speak of the Indians as generous, which we could associate with modern-day deployments and counter-deployments of noble savagery essentialism. (I would note that generosity of “savages,” native peoples, or indigenous peoples does carry into many of today’s representations of indigenous peoples with striking consistency, for better or for worse.)

¹⁴³ The Noble Savage may have been a straw man by which racist anthropologists have struck down any kind of valuation of the other; it may stand as an easy way to malign indigenous culture against the logic of Western science (particularly in the myth of the Ecologically Noble Savage (Hames 2007)); and it may stand as a wall of defense against charges of the destructiveness of modernity. Yet, as Edward Said (1979) illustrated (also see works by Cohn (2004)), colonial and imperial racism have proceeded not just on the grounds of a denigration of the other, but on a fascination, an attraction, an uncanny attraction-repulsion (Taussig 1987; Povinelli (2005)), both in justifications as “respect” for the “primitive” (despite violent material exploitation) and as a reification of what is valued in the other (“their culture” should be respected despite violent material exploitation).¹⁴³

and tolerable means of adivasi expression of difference, as we will see in detail in Chapter 3.

Rights and Recognition at the WGIP

Andrea Muehlebach (2001) sets out to explicate the “culturalist arguments” in operation at the U.N.’s Working Group on Indigenous People in the 1980’s and 1990’s, using indigenous “place” as her analytic. She sees place as a productive way to view indigenous delegates’ arguments, using place and space as meaning a space in the discourse, in the “imagery,” and in the world, so to speak, as envisioned by the U.N. and other transnational bodies. Yet Muehlebach also takes advantage of place’s multiple meanings, gesturing also to a sentimental “sense of place” (Basso 1996) and to its more literal meanings as territory, given that debates over indigenous rights often involve rights to land.

According to Muehlebach, the primary way in which indigenous people have voiced their concerns is via a politics of morality,¹⁴⁴ a discourse of shaming the West and its establishment for not living up to its liberal principles. She asserts that indigenous groups have had relatively little success over long periods of time in articulating their demands in terms of territory. Instead, in identifying with or at least deploying Western notions both of universal human rights as group rights, and of fetishized representations of indigenous people,¹⁴⁵ representatives are able to articulate a temporal-moral distinction

¹⁴⁴ See Chatterjee (1999) for an elaboration on politics of morality as “political society” in most of the world, as opposed to rights-based “civil society”.

¹⁴⁵ See accounts of indigenous meta-discursive “talk about courtroom talk” in Richland (2007) and Oakdale (2004).

between “what is and what should be,” arguing that timeless cultures, ancient life forms, and human harmony with ecology (Hames 2007) and community are what has been lost (Niezen 2000). Thus, images of an Edenic past can be linked to a utopic future, while states and capital have rendered the present bleak and hopeless, as exemplified by the plight of indigenous people worldwide (Muehlebach 2001).

The problems with the politics of difference have been analyzed and rehashed in anthropology and related theory.¹⁴⁶ People are rendered, if not as objects, then at least as seriously essentialized subjects,¹⁴⁷ virtually immobilized as they are inextricably bound to simplified and static views of their identities (Muehlebach (1996); Bendix (1997) on authenticity). Counter-arguments, viewing these essentialisms as a necessary evil of sorts (Spivak (1995); Strong (1996); Hale (2006)), argue that they are strategies which are integral to the politics of many disenfranchised groups.¹⁴⁸ Ultimately, both of these strains of critique carry many valuable insights for thinking through the “indigenous” question, while which is more useful may be completely context-dependent.¹⁴⁹ Without identity politics on the world stage, at present, there is little left to many groups but nation-state sovereignty or individual human rights, both extremely limited in their vision and seemingly unable to address indigenous peoples’ legitimate claims.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ See Boggs (2002) on the ongoing tensions between what he terms “liberal theory” and “cultural theory” in indigenous recognition.

¹⁴⁷ See Strong (1996) for an analysis of the usefulness of essentialisms and (1997) for the politics of museum labeling.

¹⁴⁸ Bonfil-Batalla’s (1996), for example, requires this type of essentialism to make its case.

¹⁴⁹ If in Ghosh’s (2006) case in Jharkhand, for example, this type of politics is counter-productive (see also Sylvain (2002)) then we can easily side with him in arguing against transnational “indigeneity” discourse as such. If in Niezen’s (2000) case a more equitable treatment of the Cree of Quebec has been based in such a discourse, then we would be arrogant to discredit it.

¹⁵⁰ See Niezen (2000) for a defense of politics of indigeneity in contrast to “ethnic nationalism”.

Indigenous Knowledge as Capital

What Muehlebach traces, however, is the emergence roughly toward the end of the last decade of a shift away from morality claims and toward a framing of indigenous peoples' value on the world stage in terms of capital.¹⁵¹ Global ecology rhetoric which increasingly emphasizes sustainable development as the only way out of an ecological disaster mode creates an atmosphere in which indigenous "knowledge"¹⁵² is increasingly valued.¹⁵³ Further, not only do these pockets of knowledge hold value, but the very *valuing* of a variety of knowledges *itself* has value in a rhetoric of cultural diversity analogized to the preservation of biodiversity.¹⁵⁴

Whether considered "adivasi" or "indigenous", this valuing of culture in terms of capital is certainly in operation in forest spaces of Bangladesh. Particularly in areas which have been shaped to some degree by the USAID-funded Nishorgo/IPAC organization, "indigenous culture" and "indigenous knowledge" are used as vague referents toward an eco-friendly and authentic skill set which can be incorporated into markets as "alternative income", which we will see in Chapter 4. In Chapter 3, we will see how indigenous culture is then also deployed by Mandi leaders as a sort of cache in NGO circles, while not being divorced from culture as identity and as pleasure for many Mandi.

¹⁵¹ Perhaps unsurprising to observers like Harvey (1990) and Foucault (2008) following the emergence and deeper logics of neoliberalism, indigenous "culture" is being marketed and appropriated under strategies of increasingly "flexible accumulation" (Harvey 1990).

¹⁵² We might distinguish this as "wisdom" in contrast to scientific knowledge, though its representation as "knowledge" is indicative of its increasing legitimacy (Hames 2007).

¹⁵³ See McKinnon (2006) for a discussion of the increasing "pro-localism" in knowledge evaluations characteristic of contemporary sustainable development discourse.

¹⁵⁴ See, for example, an interview with anthropologist Robbins Burling in Gain (2002).

While indigenous plant knowledge is acquired to some degree without compensation¹⁵⁵ by my informant Asif Uddin (detailed in chapter 6), in Modhupur it is primarily *difference itself*, couched as biodiversity-cum-cultural diversity, which is the actual value being posited as potentially offering a return. However, indigenous intellectual property is only of value insofar as it is useful to technology or Bangladesh's representation of itself as diverse. A further predicament comes when the reverse is considered; as Elizabeth Povinelli (2005) elaborates so well in terms of legal arguments, if adivasis start to value indigeneity and incorporate indigenous intellectual property as capital, then it loses its authenticity as indigenous and its own knowledge becomes suspect. In contrast, liberal forms of governmentality (Bangladesh's NGO sector) are only ever enriched by appropriation of indigenous knowledge, and become *less* rather than *more* suspect by that incorporation.¹⁵⁶

Multiculturalism and the Indigenous Slot

The discourse of multi-culturalism¹⁵⁷ aspires to recognize difference while suspending value judgment and denying hierarchy, yet multi-culturalist policies typically

¹⁵⁵ In addition to indigenous knowledge as a general commodity or culture as a cache is the issue of the direct commodification of specific marketable pieces of "indigenous knowledge" (often plant knowledge), often raising the issue of compensation and knowledge "rights". An edited volume by Brash and Stabinsky, *Valuing Local Knowledge* (1996), contains fifteen articles reviewing various cases in which a notion of indigenous intellectual property rights (IPR) has been at stake, reflecting the trend outlined by Muehlebach. Gudeman and Nahban et al., though their suggestions of "culturally appropriate" mechanisms of compensation recall colonially-rooted beliefs and policies essentializing natives as incapable of properly comprehending money and deferment of capital; more trenchant critiques do come from Dove and Varese (all in Brash and Stabinsky 1996).

¹⁵⁶ Anna Tsing (2005), in contrast, offers somewhat of a defense of incorporation of indigenous knowledge against blanket condemnations of the practice, preferring instead to focus on "collaboration", an optimistic model.

¹⁵⁷ See de la Peña (2005) for a critique of multi-culturalism as neo-liberalism; Jackson and Warren (2005) for a literature review detailing the transition to neoliberal multi-culturalism in Latin America; Boggs (2002) on the tensions

require the recognition of minorities and disenfranchised people as disadvantaged and therefore deserving of compensation.¹⁵⁸ While post-colonial contexts provide drastically different historical grounds for any kind of indigeneity politics today,¹⁵⁹ I argue that similar themes creep into many post-colonial civil societies,¹⁶⁰ despite the fact that their publics and politics might receive these discourses quite differently from North American settler states or the mestizo nations of Latin America.¹⁶¹ While multi-culturalism is not one of the key axes of the mainstream secular versus Islamic nationalist debate in Bangladesh, a version of multi-cultural inclusion is posited by the secular left, and is certainly in operation in Bangladesh's representation of itself to the wider world. Via tourism promotion campaigns and other representations, the nation seeks to represent itself (especially to the West) as inclusive and pluralistic.

Summarizing these paradoxes – in order to legitimately claim land and cultural rights in Australia¹⁶² (and many of these same themes are in evidence elsewhere),¹⁶³ the

between liberalism and multi-culturalism; Bonfil-Batalla (1996) for a critique of *mestizo* as multi-culturalist “melting pot” in Mexico; and Leuthold (1998) on indigenous art aesthetics and multi-culturalism.

¹⁵⁸ These themes are worked out by Elizabeth Povinelli in the *Cunning of Recognition* (2005). What Povinelli finds in contemporary Australian Aboriginal land claims is that the politics of recognition themselves contain not just a problematic essentialism, nor an erasure of difference, but a type of logical-legal trap in which the very anxieties of the settler-colony-cum-nation-state are worked out on indigenous lives. Demands are placed on indigenous people which can be seen to resonate with international indigeneity discourses at the U.N., and indeed in the U.S. (Biolsi 2005), Canada (Blackburn 2005; Nadasdy 2002; Niezen 2000), and much of the Americas (de la Peña (2005); Jackson and Warren (2005); Cook and Lindau, eds. (2000)).

¹⁵⁹ See the “case” of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh in Mohsin (2003); Karim (1998); and van Schendel (1994).

¹⁶⁰ The politics of the Society for Environment and Human Development, for example; see Gain (1993, 1998, 2000, 2002).

¹⁶¹ Ghosh (2006) and Sylvain (2002) show transnational indigeneity's “awkwardness of fit” in India and southern Africa, respectively; while Tsing (2005) and especially Li (2000) explore its potential usefulness in Indonesia.

¹⁶² Indigenous people are expected to perform to a standard of pure “aboriginalness” Povinelli describes as “impossible” in several ways – the standard has been constructed for them by the white state, they have interacted with settlers for centuries, and their connections with territory and any kind of “past” have in many cases been forcefully severed by this same state. The second set of paradoxes is that while expected to perform to this standard of authenticity, aboriginal people can also open themselves to the charge of being *too* authentic, especially with regard to cultural practices the state deems as repugnant to a modern liberal order. A final part of the paradox comes

“indigenous group”, must: demonstrate its authenticity, both by distance from mainstream culture and by self-consistency, despite the state’s confessed previous assault on that self-consistency; remain appropriate (non-repugnant) to liberal culture while not being too much like it; and demonstrate these claims coherently and with court-approved evidence while not providing *too* much coherence lest indigenous culture lose its aura of mystical unknowability. Seeing these patterns replicated at the WGIP (Muehlenbach 2001) and in various contexts around the globe, what perhaps best characterizes the contemporary “indigenous” question is not so much a mere hierarchy (though that hierarchy undoubtedly persists). Instead, we see the persistence of an “indigenous slot” (Li 2000) into which modern states and transnational entities have tried so hard to cram their *own internal* paradoxes¹⁶⁴ that the indigenous peg will never fit the hole. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the creativity by which indigenous people have reshaped the hole or even managed to avoid the slotting altogether.¹⁶⁵

While, again, post-colonial states with their very different histories from that of Australia and other settler states, undoubtedly, do not wrestle with these questions of

about as the white Australian search for the “moment” of aboriginal knowledge provides excitement, anticipation, anxiety, and the potential for horror. Yet the moment of realization of aboriginal culture is always deferred, as its very incomprehensibility is part of its aura.

¹⁶³ See, for example, Minde (2008); Kirsch (2007); Blackburn (2005); Dombrowski (2002); and Hodgson (2002).

¹⁶⁴ See Boggs (2002) on the contradiction between “liberal theory” and “cultural theory” and Biolsi (2005) on the attempted implementation of modular “nationalism” for native peoples, both in the U.S..

¹⁶⁵ On indigenous creativity and strategic resistance: Guhathakurta (2004) documents a young Chakma activist’s complex negotiations of “hill person” and “woman” in political resistance to the state of Bangladesh; Kirsch (2007) details innovative use of globalization infrastructure in Papua New Guinea; Li (2000) renders the complex positioning of indigenous people in Indonesia; Little (2004) highlights resistance to pan-Mayan politics and strategic identity deployments of indigenous identity among handicraft vendors; Minde (2008) complicates indigenous politics as consisting of economic, legal, cultural, and artistic articulations; Muehlmann (2008) and Whiteley (2003) documents resistance to “language as cultural repository” for indigenous people; Niezen (2000) shows the ways in which Cree in Quebec navigate complex international forums; and Richland (2007) details indigenous ironic “talk about courtroom talk” in devising resistance strategies.

liberal multi-culturalism and indigeneity as head-on, as global indigeneity and an NGO community operating under its assumptions has become a prevalent and recognizable means for adivasi identity and politics, many similar themes prevail. In Bangladesh, while adivasi land claims are not yet so legalized, organizations like Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (BELA) have begun to mobilize in stylistically similar ways, attempting to hold the state accountable to its own policies while articulating a sympathetic notion of indigenous rights. And also similarly, culture can be mobilized in ways tolerable as cultural diversity, while remaining limited to broader notions of mainstream respectability, as we will see in chapter 3.

Chapter 2 – The NGOscape Setting: AUG, MEG, Enviro- indigeneity, and the Climate of Suspicion

In other words, through the nineteenth century and the twentieth and through different political ideologies, the Adivasi has repeatedly appeared in India as a contrary, critical presence within capitalist modernity - and therefore played the role of that very political agent who undoes, at the very moment of its establishment, the hegemony of the superordinate political form of the time - be it the empire, the nation, or the global corporation. Whether we look at the adivasi's role in autonomous anti-colonial struggles or at their secessionist critique of a centralized Indian state, whether we look at their particular kind of participation in militant left mobilizations or at their vanguard role in currently ongoing environmental struggles against industrial modernity - the Indian 'tribe' seems to assume the role of that final and radical political moment which political ideologies repeatedly harness though not necessarily and always fully acknowledge. (Banerjee 2006: 108-9)

The NGOscape is a vital way of understanding attempts toward security-management practices and environmentality, and in forest contexts, it is the particular constellation of environment, indigeneity, and neoliberal capital that work toward this change. I use the term “NGOscape” to describe the constellation of forces and meanings which, on one hand, are heavily “governmental” in that they deploy practices of management and subject formation characteristic of modern governance, while existing technically outside of national governments like that of Bangladesh. At the same time, this NGOscape, like Arjun Appadurai’s five “scapes,” is a “deeply perspectival” construct, which is “inflected very much by the historical situatedness of different sorts of actors,” with the individual acting as the “last locus” to “both experience and constitute these larger formations”. As such, the “scape” provides a broad framework, but one which highlights the particular form of “the NGO” so pervasive in Bangladesh. In the type of NGO I analyze, it is in the bringing together of perspectives on environmental

preservation and indigeneity, with a heavy dose of neoliberal capital that much of the “tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” in globalization is worked out for Bangladesh’s forest spaces (Appadurai 1990).

This chapter lays out the setting of several NGO spaces, and the background of the NGOization of Bangladesh. In doing so, it also introduces *representation* of indigenous culture as a key facet of the dissertation, as well as what I term the “climate of suspicion” often characteristic of the business and process of NGOs at my fieldsite and in Bangladesh more broadly. The “climate of suspicion” references the ways NGOs manage competition and infighting in a field with limited resources and high stakes in their ability to manage their image in order to route funding their way, as well as the ways in which many Bangladeshis have come to exercise suspicion toward NGOs in general.

Introduction: The Climate of Suspicion

I describe two organizations, an indigenous-run organization NGO called Adivasi Upliftment Group (AUG) based in my fieldsite of Modhupur, and Minority and Environment Group (MEG), based in the capital city of Dhaka, while primarily focusing on MEG. I describe what their sites look like and their daily work. I lay out some framing for the issues of indigeneity and environmentalism in Bangladesh, and how these themes are refracted through these organizations. In doing so, I also provide a context for later ethnographic and analytical detail on how these organizations engage in representation, direct political action, and debates about modernity and tradition.

The overarching theme I read in this context is one of enormous power differentials and differentials of vulnerability which render the way development is experienced on the ground as, for some, everyday and commonplace, while for others, dramatic and fraught with enormous swings of fate. I call this space the “climate of suspicion”. As I detail in chapter 6, late in my fieldwork, this very climate of suspicion came to be visited upon me, as I was felt to be invading defined territories of work. Though I was able to dispel some of that suspicion, it was visited swiftly and forcefully, and further illuminates how and why this climate operates.

The IPO landscape in Modhupur

Nabin: This is my friend Bapa. Bapa, what is the name of the NGO you work for?

Bapa: It’s an IPO!

Nabin: Oh, an IPO. See, they call themselves IPO because “NGO” has a bad ring to it. You go into some school classrooms and have the children all stand up and say what their father does, and it will be, “NGO kaj, NGO kaj, NGO kaj,” [“NGO work”] and the kids won’t even know what it is they do. I myself was embarrassed at first to admit I was an NGO guy to my father-in-law! (Both laughing.)

Though the term “non-governmental organization” easily applies to the organizational style and funding mechanisms of many of the indigenous-run organizations in Bangladesh working as advocates for indigenous concerns through development and human rights capacities, indigenous people themselves often resist the label. Surely, with the enormous variety of activities in which “NGOs” engage in Bangladesh, it is useful to employ a more detailed descriptor than NGO, such as “micro-creditor” or the like, but the term “NGO” is resisted not so much for its lack of specificity as for its negative valence. NGOs are ubiquitous and so often associated with doldrums,

ineffectiveness, or even corrupt activity that it at times becomes shameful work. This taint operates differently depending on one's power relationship to NGO culture: the very educated classes may dismiss NGOs as part of the cycle of foreign dependency and a resource drain, and the poor may view them as exploitative but at times strategically useful, while both may share the suspicions referenced above -- that they are common sources of ineffectiveness or corruption. This reputation is partially responsible for the insistence among many indigenous actors of using the term "Indigenous Peoples' Organization" for their organizations claimed as "their own"--equally acronym-able, yet without the notoriety.

Some well-known IPOs in Bangladesh who deal with Garo issues (as opposed to the many groups focused on the Chittagong Hill Tracts and oriented toward Chakma, Marma, or Tripura concerns) include IPDS (Indigenous Peoples' Development Services), TWA (Tribal Welfare Association), and Adivasi Forum. These organizations are national in reach, and tend to have regional sub-offices. Smaller, more locally-based organizations with similar names are far too numerous to count.

In the case of the Modhupur locale, prominent players include Adivasi Upliftment Group (AUG), Achik Michik Society (a more recent female-centered and female-run ally of AUG), and local representatives of Indigenous Peoples' Development Services (IPDS) and the Tribal Welfare Association (TWA). There is a relatively new, up-and-coming organization called SBC (Society for Biodiversity Conservation) which is based in Jhenagati (adjacent to the northern border) but which also works in Modhupur, and there are several student groups, including important chapters of the Garo Chatro Sangathan

(Students' Union). There are innumerable other welfare organizations in the area (from the ubiquitous Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Grameen and Asha branches down to much smaller outfits), but these are the more well-known ones which focus near-exclusively on adivasi concerns. In addition, the Catholic Church and the Church of Bangladesh focus on adivasi welfare issues—while many church services are technically available to anyone, their parishioners are exclusively adivasi in Modhupur, and increasingly so nation-wide, making adivasis the priority. I will focus primarily on Adivasi Upliftment Group, as one of the most active organizations, and a representative one.

The goals of these organizations, like their titles, are typically vaguely stated, as is the case with much NGO work in Bangladesh. Broad and malleable agendas allow IPOs, like other NGOs, to apply for funding to a variety of organizations, under a variety of project headings, increasing the chances of the organizations' sustenance in a competitive grant market. Categorical terms like “development”, “agriculture”, and “sustainability” are mainstays, while “environment”, “biodiversity”, “nature”, and “climate change” are more newly-employed descriptors in organization titles and goals, which reflect broader current donor and development interests.

Non-governmental organizations and Indigenous People's Organizations in the current NGOscape play back and forth between situating themselves as local and as non-local. The broadly-stated goals references above, such as “environmental sustainability”, “climate change”, and “development” efforts reference global fields on these subjects, and an outward-looking, at times cosmopolitan, viewpoint, as well as interaction with

donors and funding mechanisms abroad. However, NGOs, particularly those situated in rural contexts, also must make constant reference to “the local”, convincing the local leaders and population that their broad, globally-referencing agendas are cognizant of and attentive to local concerns. In this way, and also due to their ubiquity, NGOs are often a key locus for the push and pull of homogenization and heterogenization referred to by Appadurai’s “scapes”.

It is crucial, however, to pay attention to the actual (and often local) form of the NGO. In Bangladesh’s forest spaces, what might an actual NGO or IPO look like? Where is it situated, geographically and socially, and what kinds of work does it actually do? With such broad, global themes, it is often easy to lose sight of these on-the-ground perspectives of NGOscapes.

Setting: AUG

The Adivasi Upliftment Group office is in Jolchatro, the center hub of commercial activity adjacent to the Modhupur Forest Area, located along the main highway running from Tangail (and connecting from the capital of Dhaka further south) northeast to Mymensingh. AUG is in an unassuming building across from a large field (used most regularly by teenagers for playing cricket, but sometimes for other community events). Local Mandis with grievances, those involved in community organizing efforts, and sparse out-of-town visitors drift in to meet with its Secretary. After crossing a non-descript courtyard, they might be asked to wait for a minute in their meeting room.

They would walk through a set of green metal doors into the largest of the three small rooms in the building, the meeting room. A particularly observant visitor might notice the hodgepodge of items delineating a rural NGO office space, and in particular the cultural form of the adivasi NGO (IPO): mainly *adivasir songskritir jinnish* (“adivasi cultural things”), books, and especially posters and calendars which promote the NGOs with which they are allied and which are also part of the vast NGO networks in Bangladesh.

Flanking the doors on the inside, a visitor would see two posters: on one side an advertisement for a “*Bissho nari dibosh*” (World Women’s Day) celebration sponsored by BARCIK in 2002 and on the other side an NGO poster for adivasi cultural rights. Glancing in a clockwise direction around the room from the door they might notice: a woven basket labeled “BELA” in black paint (Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers’ Association – a group who offers legal and strategic advice to the Mandis, and sometimes mounts court cases on their behalf) and containing a papier-mâché chicken, three large *kram*¹⁶⁶ drums, an assortment of smaller drums, two more baskets, a World Vision calendar, an empty blackboard, two stacks of fifteen plastic chairs each, a purple bicycle painted with a flower and the word “Beauty”, a long bamboo pole, a clock, a “Transparency International Anti-Corruption Fair 2007” postcard, a large whiteboard, a very exoticized and sensual photograph advertising the “Indigenous Women” exhibit by well-known photographer “Mamud” and sponsored by Action Aid at the Drik Gallery in Dhaka, yet two more woven baskets, and a painted poster. They would sit in a plastic

¹⁶⁶ A crucial symbol of status in a Mandi household and formerly used ceremonially.

chair at a large wooden meeting table in the center of the room, flanked by seven odd other plastic chairs, and be offered tea while they waited. In front of them on the table would sit a *Daily Star* (an English-language newspaper), a *Prothom Alo* (Bangla newspaper – owned by the same company and with a similar, liberal slant), a red plastic water pitcher, one over-turned glass with water droplets clinging to the inside, and some sizable piles of chalk dust.

A more regular or better-acquainted visitor might sit with Eugene in his office next door, about half the size of the conference room. Glancing around the office clockwise, they would find: a large metal green bookcase containing pamphlets and the books of the small AUG library, a harmonium and *tablas* and Eugene’s motorcycle helmet on top of the bookcase, then on the other side of the metal door to the toilet an empty desk with a few logbooks and a “Radiant Pharmaceuticals” mini-calendar, an NCIP poster that says “*Adibasider Songbidanik Sikriti Cai*”, a Bangladesh Adivasi Forum poster, an IPDS calendar, an election poster for the upcoming Tribal Welfare Association election, an Indigenous People’s Forum (an alliance of organizations) poster with the names of all 45 participant organizations, a box for a Symphony brand cell phone, a box for a Cybershot camera re-labeled “X-mas Cards & old picture”, an indoor thermometer still in its packaging, a wall-hanging depicting Mother Theresa and the words “Keep the joy of loving the Poor and share this joy with all you meet. Remember works of love are works of Peace.”, a painting of Ghandi walking with his staff, a suit-hanger from a tailor, a large gourd, another large bookcase plastered with a large photo of AUG founder Poresh Mree, small photos of the pope, a bishop, and Jesus, a rice beer drum and two

small mock effigy posts (*kima*) on top of the bookcase, a Misereor/Brot calendar displaying September 2010 with a picture of a radiant African girl, a black Citimax Westminster Chime clock, and a table with mail, a notebook, a red plastic water pitcher, and a beige plastic cup with a saucer. Other items about the room include a woven basket waste can and a bow and arrow. On Eugene's wooden desk are a plastic eyeglass case, a stack of printed emails with his motorcycle keys on top, a two-hole puncher, a globe paper-weight and a blown glass paper-weight, a Transparency International mini-calendar, stacks of financial logs, a small pair of computer speakers, a tiny blue Asus laptop with an external keyboard plugged into it, a roll of green packing tape, and a few prize ribbons.

Eugene might excuse himself to print a certificate for AUG's former secretary who is waiting, explaining "I have to do this while we have power". The printer, unlike the battery-powered laptop (including its low-speed wireless modem), will not work for most of the day, as "load-shedding" (cutting off electricity because demand exceeds supply) is the norm rather than the exception in rural areas these days. On the desk might sit a large list of documentation required by Oxfam, one of AUG's donor organizations. The documentation required would include detailed expenditure reports and lists of activities and peoples served, and about half of the items have been checked-off in black pen. These types of documentation keep small NGOs like AUG enmeshed in the donor's world, and provide the model of how an organization is to be run.

The objects around the room outline some of the functionality of an Indigenous Peoples' Organization (IPO) like AUG. Firstly, the organization is enmeshed in a vast network of similar organizations, of associations of organizations, of allied and sister organizations. Regular events, conferences, and celebrations are crucial, what AUG might call “awareness-raising” and “alliance” events.

The “*adivasi* cultural artifacts” are quite divorced from any kind of “traditional” cultural context (a “miniature” of a *kima* ancestral post, for example, and *kram* drums which once represented the status and wealth of a family with the name of a sponsoring NGO written across the side with marker to delineate their property). Instead, they become a different kind of cultural artifact, signifying the NGO’s need to represent Mandi culture to a wider audience. Many Mandis describe this new context is parody, while NGO workers themselves seem somewhat immune to this argument, at least on the surface. They take it quite seriously; to them, this *is* the new form of Mandi culture, and they would emphasize it as a hybrid form: older forms are incorporated into newer forms which, yes, involve foreign money and Bengalis who do not understand the context, but still they incorporate enough elements to still *be that thing*.

Aside from the cultural artifacts are the printed materials. A lot of resources are expended on elaborate print materials – posters, calendars, postcards, and the like, at these functions – beautifully printed photographs, typically displaying an Orientalized image of an indigenous girl or young woman (or sometimes grizzled, time-worn old person), along with the organization(s)’ title(s) and a slogan about cultural or environmental justice, or even land rights. Many of these images flow from the same

handful of photographers in Dhaka, one of the most prominent among them being James (a Bengali Christian) of Minority and Environment Group, the human rights and environmental activist journalist organization I worked with extensively and which will be introduced shortly.

Though they would seem more mundane in a social context in which paper products are more plentiful (of disposable advertisements and toiletries), *these* posters, calendars, and postcards, wall-papering most IPO offices and even dotting the walls of many adivasi homes, have some amount of monetary value—for a typical IPO, especially a smaller one, these printed materials are quite an expenditure—but more importantly, their collection, from conferences and events they have hosted or attended, represent a key facet of that IPO's work. This is obvious both from the way they stand out in otherwise dusty and sparse offices and from the fact that they are kept for years—posters and calendars sometimes five or even ten years old are kept in IPO offices because they are slightly and valuable commodities.

One issue with these objects is that the eye-catching imagery they offer provides somewhat of a contrast to the slogans. In a sensitive, often militarized state like Bangladesh (completely para-militarized under a “state of exception” as recently as 2008), a slogan demanding land rights is indeed provocative; but the softened imagery they present betrays the narrow field in which these slogans are often presented. Despite the politically-toned language and conference topics, what they bestow upon the viewer is a quite depoliticized and softened rendering of indigeneity. This is not to say that this softened register is necessarily being accessed consciously. To the contrary, the form

being circulated, which is at once an Orientalized, primitivized, and often sexualized aesthetic (indigenous female bodies as sexualized/beautiful/exotic, touched on in chapter 3) is the form understood as both representing the “authentic” and as evoking sympathy. That is, the form of “indigeneity” (transplanted to a large degree from the Americas and Australia, the “settler states”, though not completely divorced from what is uniquely *adivasi* or Mandi) accessed as that of a particular kind of liberal sympathy and guilt toward a disenfranchised other. As Elizabeth Povinelli thoroughly outlines in the Australian case, by definition, these sympathies are limited to a particular kind of politics based on land and place, based on a pre-formed definition of a sympathetic indigenous person, and based on implied notions of the limits of liberal tolerance of what is acceptable indigenous cultural practice. While the *history* of *adivasi* politics in broader South Asia and in Bangladesh in particular render some of these politics unworkable (Ghosh 2006: 526), these contemporary images and slogans make an appeal to the register of transnational multi-cultural indigeneity, particularly where the case can be made that (often state-sponsored) Bengali settlement *is* comparable to indigenous displacement and genocide in Australia and the Americas. Claims to autochthony in the case of both the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Modhupur area are not particularly clear or verifiable, and what “indigeneity” provides is a form recognizable to Western donors, as well as increasingly to liberals in Bangladesh.

More importantly for my purposes than the debate over whether the transplantation of indigeneity is appropriate or useful, or whether we should delineate an “Indigeneity I” (in Western settler states) and “Indigeneity II” (in the post-colony), is the

representation of the indigenous figure as a sexualized, exoticized, and abject object. The rendering of indigenous bodies as primitive is quite familiar in many parts of the world, but I emphasize the sexualization problem for a particular reason – in rural Bangladesh, the indigenous offers a potentially sexualized experience which is particularly profound in a public sphere quite absent of acceptable female public performance. Secondly, following Kaushik Ghosh's (2010) rendering of the history of adivasi land struggle in South Asia, I wish to problematize the imagery of abjection, via poverty, via state repression, or via "backwardness", as part of a teleological imagination of indigenous liberation which may not tell its most important story. At the same time, as I will highlight again in the next chapter, I remain skeptical about the potential problem of insisting that contemporary indigenous or adivasi politics be slotted into a radical anti-statist or anti-neoliberal position scholars may envision for them. In Modhupur, there are both promoters of and detractors from a radical political positioning, and insistence on radical alterity has had both benefits and severe limitations.

The image of abjection is repeatedly emphasized by the AUG's General Secretary, the tall, clean-cut, and amiable Eugene Nokrek, in my meetings with him. In conversations in the meeting room and office described above, Eugene portrays himself to me not so much as a leader, but as a voice for the people, repeatedly emphasizing that he only speaks out, leads, and protests when asked to by "the people", that these movements are organic, even implying that his position as a leader is accepted not just humbly but somewhat begrudgingly. (This despite the hard-fought elections over his

post.) Repeatedly, his tone rises and falls in a pattern, rising with “the people ask us...” and falling with “and so we oblige”, over and over. In his formulation, he evidences his class position. But also, he references “the people” as simultaneously a body with political agency and autonomy but also as a body that is subject, the poor, the dispossessed. Hence, “the people” emphasizes the “project of seeing liberation in the political subjectivity and temporality of something akin to the citizen.” Kaushik Ghosh notes of this subject position, “The production of life as part of and in relation to dispossession then feels like something in the past, something that cannot produce political subjectivity and something that at best can only wait to attain the temporality and aesthetics of the citizen through its own dissolution” (Ghosh 2010). In contrast, what else is going on in Eugene’s reference to “the people” that does not fit this teleology of past dispossession and future realization through citizen-subjecthood? Is his manner of speaking controlled by those terms, or are they merely an aesthetic choice, a way of framing the *adivasi* problem in a familiar way to those (like me) familiar with transnational indigeneity? If we accept that indigeneity politics is restricted by such a teleology, does that pre-empt a more radical political challenge? Finally, is a radical political challenge what is really being sought here, and if not, how else might we accept the import of visions of transnational indigeneity?

What IPOs Do

Mission statements of Indigenous People's Organizations (IPOs) typically posit that the organization advocates for the human rights and cultural rights of adivasis in Bangladesh, as well as for their "development", using the term development with the assumption that development means economic advancement for themselves and not by higher directives. Further, many IPOs will link those goals to forest or environmental preservation. This is articulated in the two modalities most suitable within a Western-developmental discourse on nature, the otherwise seemingly dichotomous spirituality and science, concepts which support each other in neocolonial developmentalist discourse. That is, Orientalized spirituality of the other and scientific modernism are two sides of the modernity coin, and if a claim is weak in one of the two respects, it can be bolstered by the other. So, if *jum* (swidden agriculture) is said to be environmentally destructive in scientific terms, this blow can be lessened by recourse to primitive spirituality, while if spirituality is rendered primitive, it can often be legitimated in scientific terms.

In contrast, everyday Mandis tend to locate their value of nature neither in science nor in spirituality. Beyond the strategic and material reason for IPOs listing "nature" as one of their domains (as part of diversifying potential grant funding sources), Mandis indeed do often articulate the value of the forest, in terms of its value as a local resource, its being historically an abode away from the mainstream land settlement laws and patterns of the colonial and post-colonial states, its position in memory as a place of family, home, tradition, and value, and all the attendant affective dimensions which

render this possible, including the forest as quiet and away from the urban (Bengali)¹⁶⁷. While Mandi spirituality certainly contains some veneration of nature, contemporary interpretations of Sangsarek religious practice generally instead revolves primarily around cycles of agri-“culture” and ancestor veneration, not veneration of the forest. This aside from the overwhelming majority of Mandis identifying as Christian (in the case of Modhupur, only a handful of older folks, and in much of the rest of the country, nearly nil identify as Sangsarek), which has a significant effect on the valences of nature here. (The Church’s view of the forest is typically an instrumental one, but one with an explicit stance against the corrupt forest department in defense of its flock.) Further, even if we identify with an earlier moment in the (both etic and emic) historical imaginary of the Mandi, that is, prior generations in which Modhupur Mandi practiced swidden agriculture and foraging was far more important to subsistence, we locate elements of cultural celebration of destruction of nature (as threatening and wild) in *jum* songs.

Here enters one of the quandaries which lie at the heart of the indigeneity problem: that etic indigeneity represents a thoroughly modern worldview, while celebrating a fetishized indigeneity as teleologically prior to that worldview as containing some intractable essence which, by protecting it, “we” might protect ourselves from some of the destructive horrors of modernity. Some might refer to this as imperialist nostalgia. This nostalgia it shares with many brands of “environmentalism”.

¹⁶⁷ The *sonar Bangla* (“golden Bengal”) countryside motif most commonly associated with Nobel poet Rabindranath Tagore and still extremely prevalent in renderings of the nation and nostalgic renderings of home both for seasoned Bengali urbanites and recent or temporary Bengali migrants overlaps somewhat with this “nature”. However, for Tagore and his contemporaries, “nature” was near-exclusively a backdrop to a placid (Bengali, Hindu or Muslim) rural village scene, rather than a “place” in and of itself.

Formerly, the developmentalist state's argument has been that *jum* agriculture was inherently environmentally destructive, an argument which could ostensibly be verified via a scientific modality. Leaving aside the assumptions and cultural biases inherent in "science" for a moment, we can say that, whether the solution is just or unjust, this is a relatively straightforward problem: *jum* agriculture could be prohibited by law. Indeed, it was and still is prohibited in many areas of the country, including Modhupur. Yet what indigeneity and tribal-environmentalist form offer is a rendering which is one of many of the "Cunning of Recognition" (Povinelli) traps set out: the scientist discourse is politely reprimanded, and Mandi adivasis are invited back into the primitivist rendering, even celebrated for it (within certain acceptable liberal limits), a position which renders them lesser in the teleology.

The Mandi of urban migration, Christianity, fluency in Bengali and sometimes English, leasing or selling family forest land, and possibly running a small business, is threatening to Bengali-run organizations like MEG and SEMP, as well as some IPOs, because an abject primitive/indigeneity is the stuff of their work. It is also threatening to anthropology looking to construct an "authentic" account of "tradition" (see Robbins Burling (1997), and Erik de Maaker's recent ethnography of funerals). However, as noted earlier, we need to be cautious about taking this problem of "indigeneity" and NGO culture to its assumed conclusion – that the net result can only ever be a re-rendering of these problematic dynamics; much of what NGOs and, indeed, "indigeneity" does, is not exclusively limited by these terms. Further, NGOs are constantly shifting their goals and

paradigms, and those whom they are ostensibly serving are also using them strategically, creatively, and with circumspection.

Further, the “modern” Mandi is not necessarily a “liberated” position, but simply a current position, in all its complexity. In either case, whether land rights are recognized through customary means or sold off in order to enter the urban service sector, the trajectory has not been the one imagined by the progressive politics of the NGO community, which is dependent on a never-finished trajectory toward a model of ostensibly liberated citizenship. What I wish to add is that there is a danger, in critiquing the NGOization of adivasi politics, in inventing another type of oppositional politics which may not be resonant with adivasis themselves.

In the next section, I will detail the settings of two different non-governmental organizations working in the Modhupur area. The first is Minority and Environment Group, a Dhaka-based, Bengali-run human rights and environmental organization. The second is Adivasi Upliftment Group, a Mandi-run “IPO” (indigenous people’s organization) with more of a political and representative function. Both participate in the types of discourses outlined above, while I see AUG’s more emic rendering of the adivasi situation as able to escape some of the trappings of the indigeneity model and MEG’s more etic rendering as participating whole-heartedly in the more problematic dimensions of indigenous representation. AUG manages to selectively appropriate facets of indigeneity like “celebration of timeless tradition” and “ancestral ties to land” while contesting notions like abjection and primitiveness, and at times embracing standard developmentalist rhetoric while at other times circumventing channels of mainstreaming.

In contrast, MEG is more invested in notions of abject primitiveness, backward castes, and romantic sensualization, rendering it less able to adapt and shift with Mandi needs and current political situation.

Setting: MEG

The MEG office is non-descript. It consists of two medium-sized apartments, one on top of the other, each with a hallway flanked by two facing offices, then an office facing a kitchen, then a larger open area at the end of the hallway. Two bathrooms in each apartment adjoin the main rooms and the rear right offices, respectively. Only one of the three offices on each floor functions permanently as such – the director’s office is the third floor rear left, and the coordinator’s office is the fourth floor middle right. Each of the other four offices are partitioned into a few desks and computers, each which function as semi-permanent workspaces for the other employees, as well as serving as storage for excess books, magazines, newspaper clippings, and other miscellaneous office supplies. The third floor main room is the library, and the fourth floor main room is a presentation room, an auxiliary workspace I used as a makeshift office during my time spent there, and a staff tea break area. The third floor kitchen is mainly for food preparation, while the fourth floor kitchen is an eating space. The two balconies are empty, unlike the surrounding apartments’ balconies, on which brightly-colored *shalwar* and *lungie*¹⁶⁸ hang on clotheslines to dry.

¹⁶⁸ *Shalwar* and *lungie* are, respectively, contemporary female dress and male working-class or casual dress in Bangladesh.

The office is not shiny or new like some of the high-rises further north, near the diplomatic enclave, but is clean and adequate. The building is typical of Dhaka, steel rod and concrete construction with metal sliding windows and concrete floors. The furniture is basic wood, dark and functional. Ceiling fans keep the place bearable in the heat. In the early morning, late afternoon, or during storms there are a lot of fluorescent lights available, but most of the day enough light gets in through each room's small window that work is possible, and artificial light is not used. There is very little color; even the multi-hued shelves of the library are muted by sliding tinted plastic doors. There is a small black placard on each floor's entrance door which reads "MEG" in bold letters, and underneath in smaller lettering, "Minority and Environment Group."

Color comes mainly from the posters and publications strewn about. There are stacks of the organization's yellow-bordered periodicals as well as some of its recent large picture books and small paperbacks. Occasional loose copies litter tables and desks. The walls are far from a collage of material, but at least one or two hangings per wall punctuate the off-white concrete walls with something. A few framed newspaper articles by or about the organization aside, these are nice-looking posters advertising MEG's events, exhibitions, and publications.

In contrast to the pleasant but drab Dhaka apartments that house MEG's offices, the posters depict the vivid colors of the hills of Sylhet or the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The bright green grass of the cleared hills left by *jhum*¹⁶⁹ agriculture, pale skies, and rivers form the papers' backdrops, populated by the occasional farmer or temporary thatched

¹⁶⁹ *Jhum*, a formerly derogatory term for "slash and burn" swidden agriculture, associated in Bangladesh mainly with the inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, but believed to be practiced in the past by the Mandi as well.

hut, bird, or sunset. Color comes also from the faces. These faces are clearly not Bengali. Their features are different. They are framed by deep red clothing, sarongs, and head cloths, all draped differently from *sari* or *shalwar kameez*¹⁷⁰. Their eyes look serious and tell of deep hardship. Many are old, with wrinkle lines revealing their wisdom. Many are children, and even they look wise with the generations of cultural inheritance. Many smoke a pipe contemplatively or perform a traditional dance or ritual. Most are women, and many seem timeless.

The most common word on the posters is “Forest.” One poster is entitled “Cry of the Forest: The forest and her children—images of pain,” and reminds us that “Hundreds of species of trees, bushes, vegetables, fauna; human communities and their traditions, history, cultures and educational values form a forest.” There is a whole other side to this story—one of states and violence¹⁷¹ and borders and struggle and racism and development and NGOs—a story which sometimes involves cries and pain, but has very little to do with the ecological diversity, wisdom, or beauty of the “Forest.”

I knock on the door and am let in by a young secretary. Upon entering, the first thing I notice is the striking poster immediately opposite the front entrance. It is an altered photograph image depicting an eerily-grinning Tony Blair holding a chain leash and being dragged by a George W. Bush-faced pit bull with a spiked collar. I immediately smile at this political statement with which I agree; I’m comforted by the

¹⁷⁰ *Sari* is the intricately-wrapped female cloth garment still in common usage, though the aforementioned *shalwar kameez* is considered both less formal and more conservative, while also more contemporary.

¹⁷¹ See Amena Mohsin (2003), *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: On the Difficult Road to Peace* for a general account of the history of the conflict in the region, the 1997 Peace Accord, and post-Accord political developments.

feeling that I'm in my kind of territory if someone found this mocking statement worthy of the foremost display spot in the office. The caption reads "Mad Dogs and Englishmen," which sounded familiar to me, and I later discovered referenced a 1930s Noel Coward song which jibes, not-ironically-enough, at the distinction between the ever-present lazy native and the work-obsessed colonialist:

In Bengal
To move at all is seldom,
If ever done,
But mad dogs and Englishmen
Go out in the midday sun. (Coward 1955)

It is, of course, just after mid-day that I have entered from the street, and in my Englishmen's broken Bangla I explain what I'm doing there. I am interested in researching the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, and would like to volunteer for MEG if there is any work that I can do. Another woman is sent in, who is introduced to me as the librarian, and who offers to assist me in finding any books. It was apparent to me that I did not communicate effectively, and I shift to a veritable Banglish in explaining in more detail what I would like to do, and that I would like to meet the director if possible. The librarian says, "Wait here," and leaves. Five minutes later a middle-aged, friendly-looking man comes in and sits down across from me, at the large table in the middle of the library shelves.

"So, I hear you are interested in the CHT?" he starts. We discuss what my interest is in coming to MEG, and gradually get into who I am, and I also ask who he is.

"I'm James!"

“Oh, you’re James! Great! We have a lot of your books at my university’s library, and I’ve read many of them. So I wanted to come here and meet you.”

James is a journalist, a photographer, and an activist. He is humble about what MEG does, about the size of his organization, partly because he assumes I have familiarity with and access to larger organizations with more money. Maybe I do. But I’m more interested in MEG.

I am an anthropology graduate student and an American. I tell him I study the etics and emics of nationalism, identity, minority relations with the state, indigeneity, and environment.

James invites me to come whenever I choose, to use the library, and asks if I might write some articles for them to use, particularly on large development operations like the UN Development Project and Asia Development Bank. I tell him I can try, but that development is not my primary research area and I have no practice writing as a journalist.

We talk for a while, feeling each other out, mainly our politics. The sense of the political is heightened as I am a stranger and a *bideshi* (foreigner) coming in unannounced and asking questions about “getting involved.” In addition, Minority and Environment Group gets occasional, vague threats from government offices involving their operations, especially since the January 11th declaration of the state of emergency.

Further still, the types of questions in which I am interested, the other side of the “Forest” story, could bring much more of that unwanted government attention to MEG.¹⁷²

James encourages my use, again, of the library, and directs my attention to the formidable Anthropology section of the neatly catalogued shelves. Equally neatly catalogued, of course, are the ethnic groups which have been anthropologized in said volumes: *Marma, Mru, Tripura, Lushai*...¹⁷³

MEG’s approach to adivasis rests on a particularly salient and lucrative model of indigeneity, one which allows access to several registers simultaneously: an anthropology-derived ethnic cataloguing, an international discourse of liberal sympathy toward a disenfranchised other, and cosmopolitan access to capital through Western aid funds.

In the next section, I highlight some of the ways in which liberal cosmopolitanism may be embodied by those working at MEG, such that this type (enviro-indigeneity) of NGO work becomes not just a strategic entry point for funds, but also a way of viewing the world.

¹⁷² On January 11th, 2007, in response to ongoing clashes between political activism in the streets, the government of Bangladesh declared a state of emergency. An interim “caretaker government” has explained its primary goal as cleaning up governmental corruption. Interestingly, the momentous date is often referred to in popular discourse as “1/11,” a play on the iconic use of “9/11” to describe the bombings of the World Trade Centers in the U.S.. *Time Magazine* referred to these events in a familiar idiom, as a basket-case third world backwater plagued by Islamist fervor: Though the GDP was “surging by almost 7% last year...Bangladesh’s leaders rarely miss an opportunity to sabotage their country’s fortunes.” *Time* frantically wonders whether these events are “part of an epic struggle to determine whether or not this nation of 145 million people will become a fundamentalist Islamic state,” though it is unsurprised that “Bangladesh remains once again in crisis mode” (Robinson 2007).

¹⁷³ Some non-Bengali “tribal” groups living in Bangladesh.

Natural and Exotic Habits

Freed from specific struggles, the signifier 'indigenoussness' began to function as an interpretant to be experienced as an aura, naturalizing any struggle or commodity desire to which it was attached" (Povinelli 2002: 24).

Nabin is one of the people I became closest to during my fieldwork. Perhaps it was our shared status as married men with absent wives during an earlier trip to Bangladesh that brought us together; we were both in Dhaka while our respective spouses were in our hometowns. Nabin's wife is a secondary English teacher. He is James's second in command, MEG's chief organizer, but it is a distant second: Nabin gripes about how little he is really involved in decision-making within the organization.

He would often check on me in the storage room I used as a temporary office, to see how my work was going and to chat. It was usually in the afternoon, around tea time, that he came. He would make sure I had not been forgotten for tea and puffed rice. One day, he found me on the balcony, smoking:

Nabin: Alex!
Me: Nabin, *kaemon achen?* ("How are you?" formal form which I used out of textbook habit)
N: Fine, fine. Call me *tumi*. (less formal)
Me: *Accha*. Sorry.
N: You are smoking?
Me: Yes. I smoke from time to time. (*macche macche*)
N: Ah.
Me: Do you smoke?
N: No, no.
Me: Okay.
N: I drink sometimes, but no smoking.
Me: Okay.
N: Yeah, you see, I am an environmental man, an environmentalist. Smoking...cigarettes is bad for the air; it's bad for the environment.
Me: Yes.
N: Do you drink? Liquor?
Me: Yes, sometimes.
N: *Accha, accha*.
(The wind shifts the smoke from my cigarette toward Nabin and he stifles a cough.)
Me: Sorry.

I agreed with Nabin that smoking was bad for the environment in a knee-jerk way, as it just made sense to me. In the “progressive” social atmosphere I was accustomed to in the U.S., in Philadelphia and in Austin, there are many educated liberals who smoke, but who feel a slight guilt about smoking. Upon reflection, none of these reasons has much to do with environmental impact, but they trigger similar kinds of emotions, and are tied to a certain politics. Ostensibly wrought from feelings of dissatisfaction with the exploitative, capitalist, consumerist paradigm is a stance by U.S. progressives which includes recycling and buying organic foods; in short, the guilt-driven search for the *right* way to live. It is this discourse, of a right way to live, that I see implicit in MEG’s discourse of environmentalism, in its valorization of the indigenous in contrast to the corrupt practices of a reckless modernity.

A week later, Nabin invited me to his house for dinner. He lives in a modest apartment with his sister and brother-in-law, not far from the National Assembly building and the “NGO neighborhood” of Lalmatia where he works, at MEG. Like many Bengalis, Nabin eats later than I was accustomed to eating, close to 11:00, and my bodily habits compelled me to eat before I arrived.

Shortly after I arrived, Nabin asked me if I cared to drink with him. I said yes, and he closed the door to his large room, explaining that in Bangladeshi culture it was taboo to drink alcohol with one’s relatives. He brought out a clear bottle of transparent liquid from his refrigerator, as well as a liter bottle of Sprite and two small glasses. He asked me if I would take the liquor straight or mixed with Sprite, and I said that I would taste it

first. He chuckled as I grimaced from the intense fumes and taste from the liquor, and I requested a fair quantity of Sprite to be poured into my glass. Nabin poured himself the same, and explained:

“This is raw rice liquor, from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It’s natural. It’s made by the Chakma. I try to bring some back whenever I go there. Do you like it?”
“Yes. It’s strong, but it has an interesting taste. I like it.”

As Nabin intimated to me, the rice liquor is rare and exotic partly because it is difficult to get (the journey and the return hold value) but also because of its associations with a purer way of life. The liquor is made by an indigenous people, distilled on a small scale through non-industrial means without the augmentation of modern chemicals.¹⁷⁴ For Nabin, being an “environmentalist” means not smoking cigarettes, but it also means consuming “natural” products like this rice liquor. Here is where I see, in personal consumption practices and bodily habits, the same motif: indigeneity is associated with the natural, and with environmentalism.

A friend of Nabin’s joined us who is a businessman, a smoker, and not an environmentalist. We spent the next several hours discussing U.S. and Bangladeshi politics, as well as capitalism, development, and social issues, and occasionally, the conversation turned toward Nabin’s and my interest in indigeneity and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. His friend joked to me that he didn’t understand Nabin’s devotion to the plight of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, that his obsession with it was strange. I told him it

¹⁷⁴ The Chakma’s manufacture and consumption of rice liquor is a subject of intrigue for the region. In Bangladesh, the sale and consumption of alcohol is frowned upon as un-Islamic, and is illegal, and Chakma distillers are occasionally arrested for its production, though technically they are allowed to produce the liquor for their own consumption. The liquor is a commodity, however, and ongoing Asian Development Bank research and development initiatives have concluded that export of the inexpensive liquor for sale in bordering Burma and China have highlighted the value of its mechanized production in an otherwise economically unproductive region of the country.

would be difficult for me to characterize Nabin as obsessed, and Nabin joked that it was just a job, but a job he did feel particularly committed to. Nabin brought up the fact that in his opinion, the very notion of indigenous (*adivasi*) was problematic and contingent, but that did not make it unimportant. He also finds the common term “ethnic” (*jatishotta*) used to describe the people of the CHT unsatisfactory, as we could all be described as having an ethnicity, be it Bengali, Chakma, or European. His friend and I agreed. Nabin intimated that Chakma people had said to him that they were of a pure and unspoiled race, while he, as a Bengali, was of a mixed and therefore inferior makeup, and we also agreed that historically and ethically, this did not make sense.

Nabin’s relationship to a type of progressive and environmental thinking could be viewed in a number of ways. Several of MEG’s employees identified as Hindu and others as Christian, while very few are Muslim. How did this effect the non-consumption of meat in the MEG office, in contrast to the common meat-consumption of middle-class Bangladeshis? Did Nabin’s consumption of rice liquor strictly have to do with its association with a purer way of life, or were the lower cost of the liquor and the scarcity of liquor available in wider Muslim Bangladesh an important factor, especially since the “state of emergency”? Were Nabin’s and other MEG members’ sympathies for the indigenous people of Bangladesh partly owing to their own status as religious minorities in the country, something to which they often referred?¹⁷⁵ Yet even if other factors may

¹⁷⁵ Nabin and his friends and colleagues, once they were more at ease in my company, would occasionally make comments referring to the wider Muslim society and what they perceived as its ills or its mistreatment of people of other religions. For example, while drinking the rice liquor, Nabin mentioned what he perceives as the hypocrisy of Islam, referring to the current political climate with reference to religious identity: “Corruption is perfectly acceptable for them (Muslims). Stealing money meant for public use is okay, but drinking alcohol, which hurts no one, is not.” It should be noted that, in Bangladesh, the accusation of possession of illegal alcohol is a common way for Muslim

better explain Nabin's habits, by what avenues and what means, and for what reasons did Nabin, James, and other MEG members access a subjectivity of progressivism, environmentalism, and the privileging of purer, indigenous ways of life in order to account for their daily choices?

Over my years of knowing Nabin, he became more and more disillusioned with MEG, giving a variety of reasons for his eventual disaffection. The work became dull where it was once enticing. Over and over again, being asked to catalogue for this volume and that volume rote ethnological statistics about this or that "ethnic" people of Bangladesh was one; he could never put his finger exactly on it, but he expressed that it felt reductive and objectifying. Another reason was that he felt like the organization's efficacy had waned in recent years, and was uncomfortable with the idea of the medicinal plant project upon which they had embarked and its source of funding (more on that later). And tying his frustrations all together was the cult of personality he perceived as typical at NGOs like MEG – a single ambitious man (his boss) at its center, with motives that bordered on suspect for him, and an unwillingness to incorporate other voices and opinions. Nabin is now much more content working as a journalist for a major Bengali national daily, despite having had to enter at a position junior to what would be expected for his age due to his years spent, as he saw it, languishing at an NGO.

I read Nabin's disaffection, however, partly as becoming disillusioned with what he thought he was part of. To some degree embodying the enchantment of a fulfilling

politicians to be maligned by their opponents, and following a confiscation raid, these politicians are often described as "corrupt" themselves.

career fighting for the little guy and for unexplored environmental and human rights issues, he felt that he had been sold a bill of goods. While Nabin still remains committed to an ethics of journalism and its place in providing something of a bulwark against unchecked power, the reservations he expressed to me years ago about the small-scale corruption and impunity he thought might be inherent in NGO culture had been realized for him.

This “climate of suspicion” weighed heavily on Nabin’s mind throughout the long time he worked at MEG. Such a climate is certainly not confined to national and internationally-connected NGOs like MEG, but is pervasive at local levels such as Modhupur, as we shall soon see. I will demonstrate more thoroughly throughout the dissertation the ways in which the enviro-indigeneity NGOscape often breaks down, and how this climate of suspicion renders differential vulnerabilities for different actors.

High Culture and Low “Cultures”

The degree to which indigenous ways of knowing are privileged and co-opted in human rights and environmental discourse can be demonstrated both in Nabin’s view of the rice liquor and in the ethnographic appeals in MEG’s literature. Claims about the superiority of “local knowledges” are found not only in human rights and environmental literature, but also in more recent development literature. Two recent projects are the UNDP’s, which outlines an enormously complex system of aid through bureaucratic infrastructure, and the ADB’s which, in contrast, outlines intensive development of capitalist enterprise. Both reference “local knowledge” as a fundamental principle. As a

trend in development-speak, referencing “local knowledge” allows development initiatives to distance themselves from the misguided programs of the past. This can be scientifically justified, as past initiatives have been poorly researched and have not taken proper account of local specificity or local “culture” in order to assure effective implementation. By contrast, newer initiatives claim to include more intense ecological, sociological, ethnological, and even ethnographic research methods. In this way, they realize more fully the prospect of a holistic implementation, while at the same time offering the tantalizing prospect of lucky finds in the mining of indigenous wisdom.

Juxtapositions are made between technical knowledge and local knowledge, and both are accorded value through certain understandings of the environment as related to culture. Particular contradictions arise as a discourse concerned with human rights and critical of modern development paradigms privileges indigenous ways of knowing, while at the same time constructing, for the larger Bengali society, a progressive timeline in which it is once again lagging behind. This privileging of local and indigenous knowledge as “High culture”, while posited as a paradigm shift in development, actually recalls colonial ethno-scientific measures of civilization as well. What has shifted, then, are the terms by which the “native” is contrasted to the “developers”, rather than a significant re-rendering of the cultural power dynamic.

Kavita Philip, in *Civilizing Natures*, describes late 19th century ethnography of South India as using “a narrative in which the capacity to labor is a crucial measure of civilization” (2006: 116). With a familiar modernist sensibility, amateur ethnographers like Lieutenant-Colonel W. E. Marshall and missionary Samuel Mateer would posit the

curious complacency and laziness of the native (in this case the Toda), unable and unwilling to control and use his environment to maximum benefit. What is particularly interesting for our purposes, however, is the link Philip finds between this inability to labor and “an incapacity to appreciate nature as Western races do” (2006: 116). She describes this as resting on the logic of an assumed “high culture” of the West and its sympathizers in contrast to the low civilization of the Toda, the key symbolic distinction between the two being that in the former, the opposition between nature and culture is firmly maintained. The higher culture, then, is able to distinguish the true value of nature, which can be utilized both by laboring properly within it and by affording it its true aesthetic value, neither of which is the Toda able to appreciate (2006: 117).

This distinction between high and low culture is key to understanding the mechanisms by which development discourse resolves the contradiction between modern ways of using the environment and the privileging of indigenous or environmental knowledge. While human rights may be an important site for the debate about what happens with the environment in Bangladesh or the indigenous groups it contains, these structures of high and low cultures with differing levels of appreciation for the environment are extremely instrumental.

Large development discourse, particularly that of the Asian Development Bank, has argued strongly that less-inhabited spaces like the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and the (rapidly dwindling) Modhupur Forest are under-utilized resources. Since there is a shift (assumed to be inevitable) for the inhabitants of the CHT and Modhupur away from agricultural sustenance and stability, there must be an incorporation into marketable

production. Implicitly, the natives must be taught to labor efficiently. Yet tourism is also emphasized as having great economic potential. Those (outsiders) with the means to travel can be guided through the great natural beauty that is Modhupur or the CHT. Thus, those with the sophistication to efficiently labor in the environment *or* to appreciate its aesthetics will guide the way with their high culture. As Anna Tsing puts it, “Both conservation and development take the importance of the *proper* demarcation of spheres of humans and nonhumans, culture and nature, as a given” (2005: 175).

Minority and Environment Group (MEG)’s writing makes more recourse to a universal “human rights” than ADB’s, or other large development organizations. MEG would remain skeptical about if not outright oppose eco-parks or other tourist operations which sequester or restrict indigenous groups in order to preserve aesthetics for tourists. Yet the logic is similar, even though the roles are differently assigned, and the solutions are disparate. In MEG’s discourse, as in the colonial, anthropological, and development models to which I have been referring, the native is still assumed to be closer to nature, and assumed to not draw the proper semantic distinction between nature and culture. However, in this “progressive” style of environmentalism, that lack of distinction is actually privileged.¹⁷⁶ Those (tourists, development experts, etc.) who would maintain that barrier simply for aesthetic appreciation or labor exploitation actually become the arrogant and powerful version of low culture, while those who have learned to depreciate the nature-culture distinction are of the high culture. While Argyrou’s portrayal of this symbolic relation as the ultimate realization of modernity may be over-dramatized, I do

¹⁷⁶ In *The Logic of Environmentalism*, Vassos Argyrou (2005) dramatically refers to this as the fullest realization of the project of modernity, the deletion of the final barrier to full universalism.

agree that this is a particularly salient and fascinating characteristic of contemporary environmental thinking.¹⁷⁷

Ethnography as Salvage

As an anthropologist coming to work at SEHD in 2007 and again in 2010, it was expected that I was there to study tribal people. To the extent that I was interested in the identity politics of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Modhupur Forest, this was true. However, I was more interested in what Willem van Schendel calls the “ethnogenesis” (1994) happening there and the various contestations over the meaning and significance of the designation “indigenous” than in the kinship or rituals of specific peoples which are part of a more “traditional” scholarship of anthropologists, and have been the staple of ethnographers in India for a century or more. This is not to exempt myself from the history of such scholarship which undoubtedly informs my discipline and my orientation and interest toward these types of spaces, but it is to make mention of the historical valences of such scholarship which strongly inform contemporary understandings of indigeneity and otherness in Bangladesh.¹⁷⁸ These understandings are a common, though not completely intractable aspect of scholarship and understandings of the “environment” and the “forest.” The wilderness’s “primitive” others continue to be a ground on which environmental debates are waged, gauged, and shifted. What is useful is to follow the

¹⁷⁷ Taking the “logic of environmentalism” as the fullest realization of modernity slightly obscures the historical context of modernity and the way in which it has operated, though Argyrou (2005) ably notes the tendency in “progressive” thinking toward newer and more ultimate universalisms.

¹⁷⁸ In writing in English in Bangladesh, the term “ethnic” is often used to describe any “ethnic other,” but is often used interchangeably with “indigenous.” The corresponding Bangla terms from which these are translated both from and to are *jatishottar* and *adivasi*.

interacting meanings of environment and indigeneity, and to see how, in order to stake competing claims about the meaning and value of Bangladesh's wilderness, indigeneity is used in the present as a marker of the sacred, the innocent, and the pure, as well as the uncivilized and unproductive. Within the same field of dialogue, even in the same body of literature, indigeneity signifies both a cry for development and a defense against it, both a reason for wilderness protection and a population of logging labor, both reckless land use and sacred unity with the environment, and both continuity with the past and a hamper to the modern present.

The SEHD library has a formidable collection of ethnographic works, primarily concerning the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. While SEHD's writings on the CHT are of a more popular and political nature, it is clear that ethnography has influenced their publications. In fact, SEHD's publications often contain specific sections of ethnographic detail, sometimes with journalist and director Philip Gain telling the story, and other times with anthropologists providing their expertise.

The director, Philip, recalled to me on several occasions the work of Robbins Burling, an American anthropologist whose works can be found at SEHD's library. Burling's work deals with the evolution of language, Tibeto-Burman languages, and more specifically, ethnology of Northeastern India and Bangladesh. Burling's is probably the most widely known literature on the Garo, and Burling's monograph "The Strong Women of Modhupur" one of the only extensive pieces on the area in which I conducted

fieldwork. Burling has been a friend to Philip and to SEHD, and is featured in an interview in the second edition (2002) of their *Last Forests of Bangladesh*.

In that interview, Gain introduces Burling as someone who admits to studying the Garo “for his own selfish interests” (something Gain is often keen to point out), “But” whose work “has tremendous value in helping understand this unique people” (2002: 180). Gain asks a few introductory questions about Burling’s work and the “unique features” and “cultural values” of the Garo, before leading the interview into a discussion of the politics of identity and environment regarding indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. Burling entertains the questions with a mix of academic distance and polite reverence, as Gain mounts a defense of the Mandi (formerly called Garo) to the threat he sees from the mainstream community:

Writer: What are the values that the Mandis can be proud of in circumstances where the Bengalis sometimes look down upon them and sometimes might call them ‘jungle’?

DR. ROBBINS BURLING: Well, they are certainly honest. They do not steal. ...Their rules are absolutely symmetrical, that is the husbands and wives are absolutely equal, they have the same rights...

Writer: Modhupur forest used to be the habitat of only the ethnic people even a few decades ago. But now they are outnumbered at least three times by the Bengalis. The ethnic people are said to have tremendous pressure on them from the majority community. Would you please share with us your reflections on how their unique culture and values are affected because of such pressure from the Bengalis?

DR. ROBBINS BURLING: It certainly threatens their economy. They are losing their land progressively. ...I don’t think so far there have been radical changes in their culture because of Bengali pressure...

Writer: What is your assessment of the economic condition of the Mandis? They are said to be losing their cropland in increasing extent. Because of commercial plantation in the forest areas, the pattern of economic activities is changing. Where will the Mandis of the Modhupur forest stand in the future in terms of economic condition?

DR. ROBBINS BURLING: The Mandis consider themselves to be farmers. Their economic activities are based on agriculture. ...Now they are not entirely dependent on agriculture any more. This is a disaster. There are one or two families in the whole village which have enough land to feed the whole family. In this situation, what the Mandis need

most is vocational training. They are, in fact, getting vocational training in various technical schools. (2002: 183-6)

In this dialogue, Burling tries not to be as explicitly political as Gain is asking him to be, while Burling's scholarly authority adds legitimacy to the claims Gain is making in the book about the value of what is to be saved from imminent destruction. Burling's knowledge of the Mandi provides an implication of the uniqueness of the culture under threat. Yet despite his ethnographic expertise, the cultural summary provided here is nearly identical both to the descriptions by a long-time American priest of the Modhupur area (with surely different designs and a noted distaste for anthropology's "godlessness") and to colonial amateur-ethnographic descriptions of the Mandi. The similarity is akin to Said's descriptions of his "aha!" moments in articulating Orientalism – that he found writers from different eras unconsciously reproducing the exact same "peoples" of the Middle East.

For Burling, it is a "disaster" that the Mandi are no longer entirely agricultural, so in the lamentable march of progress they must accept their fate and undergo "vocational training" into modernity. The final question of the interview is particularly interesting in this regard, as the uniqueness of the Mandi as a sort of species are linked to the discourse on environmental extinction:

Writer: The tree plantation programs in the Modhupur Forest with the exotic species are said to be a clear violation of the Convention on Biological Diversity because of the fact that such programs are destroying the local ecosystem. What is your observation on the loss of biological diversity in the Modhupur forest and cultural diversity of the Mandis?

DR. ROBBINS BURLING: I think there is a certain parallel between biological diversity and cultural diversity. There is a lot of concern, of course, in the west about biological diversity. I, as an anthropologist, see great human value in cultural and linguistic diversity. I think it is more interesting to live with lots of different kinds of people. I do not want the whole world to speak English. I think it would be then very dull.

I am concerned about the survival of the Mandis and the Mandi language. If their economy is too badly undercut, if their ecosystem is changed, if they become bi-lingual, if their kinship practices are changed, then their own language and values get severely affected.

...I think sometimes, people who have taken over the colonial power discriminate against their own minorities. This is true for the Mandis of Bangladesh. (2002: 186)

Here bilingualism is a threat to the cultural purity of the anthropological specimen called Mandi, and the unique “kinship practices” which are particularly “interesting” would be a loss as well. I highlight this dialogue not to lambast Burling as a relic of anthropology’s past of essentializing “cataloguing” or “salvage” work, but to highlight the themes of cultural uniqueness and Bengali pressure, and the link between ecological and cultural purity. Running through this talk is a sense that a monolithic Bengali (Muslim) culture, partially corrupted by modern disregard for the environment, is threatening to simultaneously erase a utopic society of native peoples and an ecotopia of native wildlife.

It is important not to read too much into what comes across as a relatively scripted and edited interview, but it is striking that Burling references “those who run the country” as the ones who do not “treat the people equally,” and who “have taken over the colonial power” to “discriminate against their own minorities” (2002: 186). It would be hard to dispute that the government of Bangladesh has discriminated against its ethnic others, most notably through organized expulsion for various civic projects and systematic violence and intimidation as “anti-terrorism” campaigns. Yet this statement partially obscures the historical relationship between the colonial government and ethnic

minorities, and between the scholarship of Western ethnologists and ethnographers and other types of systematic discrimination.

Burling's and Gain's argument for a more just treatment of indigenous people is articulated in terms of human rights, an appeal to basic ethical considerations which sees the discrimination visited upon the indigenous people of Bangladesh and wants to rectify that through realization into citizen subjecthood (Ghosh 2010). Yet it also continues to view the adivasi through the trope of the "noble savage," in which the indigenous way of life is somehow more pure and natural, and needs to be protected from modernity's corrupting influence.

Wolfgang Mey describes this positive description as one of two main types of "image production" about adivasis in Bangladesh, one which highlights the wisdom and innocence of the tribal, in contrast to the other which views the tribal's resistance to modernity negatively, in terms of ignorance, and needing to be rectified (2006). Mey sees continuity in this type of discourse, from Deputy Commissioner T. H. Lewin's 1865 account of the Hill Tracts, to the present. It is interesting to note that Philip Gain references Lewin's descriptions of the hills when describing them. Yet by referencing it, Gain is invoking a utopic, pre-modern past for the CHT, while also linking himself in a trajectory which posits a specific endpoint, a trajectory from abjection to liberation (Ghosh 2010).

In Gain's human rights and environmentalist discourse, Lewin's reference to "simple and primitive races" would be written off as an antiquated product of his time, but a reference to "children of Nature" may not be far off the mark (Lewin 1978 (1870):

3). In fact, when Lewin describes these “wild races” as people who “love and hate, eat and drink, live and die, in much the same, and often in a far more natural and sensible manner than we of the civilized races” (1978: 2), he is arguing on practically the same terms as Gain. As Lewin narrates his journey through the various tribal lands, he highlights racial characteristics such as the particularly “well-made and wonderfully muscular” physiques of the Lusai (1978: 135), or general demeanor among the hill tribes: “They have an honest, bright look, with a frank and merry smile; and their look does not belie them, but is a faithful index of their mental characteristics” (1978: 48). Among both the Chakma (1978: 100) and the Lusai (1978: 134) crime is an extreme rarity, and for the latter, there are “no caste or class distinctions among them” (1978: 133). It is striking that Burling in his interview, and Gain in his writing, 130 years later, reference these same characteristics, of equality, and of lack of criminality, to distinguish the nobility of adivasi people from Bengalis, couched in almost the same language. An American priest, over eighty years old, who has lived in the Modhupur area most of his life, references, again, the same characteristics to describe his Mandi congregation—honesty and gender equality—almost obsessively.

Also for Lewin, with the exception of the Buddhist tribes, “Their religion is simple: it is the religion of nature” (1978: 103). It is this inherent reverence for nature seen among the hill tribes that is so appealing to a contemporary environmentalist vying for legitimacy with a modernizing state and an expanding population with conflicting claims to responsible land use. Yet for Lewin, the tribal people have yet to fully

appreciate Nature, in its sophisticated and cosmopolitan sense, nor to master it, qualities which might allow them full incorporation into humanity:

The idea that they are well enough is a seductive one—to live according to Nature as the old Stoic philosophers taught; and if this idea could be perfected, *if these people could be taught to live according to Nature in its higher sense*, to rise above all gross and base indulgences, mindful of those higher laws of which only self-denial and self-command can render observance possible, I am not prepared to say but that this would be the wisest and grandest ideal. (1978: 179)

Interestingly, the bulk of Lewin's conclusion lauds the equality of women and men in tribal society, a theme which has served as part of the human rights defense of indigenous culture, while also serving as an anthropological theme of interest, particularly with regard to the Mandi and Khasi.

Lewin's concluding paragraph is remarkably similar to a present-day development discourse which argues for incorporation of local knowledges into a more respectful rule over tribal peoples:

This I say, then, let us not govern these hills for ourselves, but administer the country for the well-being and happiness of the people dwelling therein. Civilization is the result and not the cause of civilization. What is wanted here is not measures but a man. Places over them an officer gifted with the power of rule; not a mere cog in the great wheel of Government, but one tolerant of the failings of his fellow-creatures, and yet prompt to see and recognize in them the touch of Nature that makes the whole world kin—apt to enter into new trains of thought and to modify and adopt ideas, but cautious in offending national prejudice. *Under a guidance like this, let the people by slow degrees civilize themselves. With education open to them, and yet moving under their own laws, they will turn out. Not debased and miniature epitomes of Englishmen, but a new and noble type of God's creatures.* (1978: 183)

Examples from the Pakistani period have similar descriptions of the utopic tribal village: “The Murungs, on the whole, are a peace-loving people, happy and contented in their surroundings, and therefore, hardly any cases of crime or theft are reported in this area” (Rajput 1963: 10).

Though there is a significant lack of ethnographic material on adivasis of Bangladesh, one can see in the colonial ethnography of other parts of India, and in other parts of the world, similar themes which were carried through. Katherine McKinnon (2006), for example, in her work on Thailand, also points to the privileging of indigenous life-worlds. She refers to an anthropological “ethic of doing good,” which she locates as far back as early notable anthropologists like Boas, Levi-Strauss, and Radcliffe-Brown. Similarly to the way Gain and Burling present themselves, “The good ethnographer thus becomes someone who helps, who understands and translates, who respects the culture of the 'primitive' other, and works to preserve it against the eroding force of the modern” (McKinnon 2006: 25).

Though not an environmental treatise itself, a 1987 study on *Tribal Women and Forest Economy* in Orissa also outlines the logic of environmentalism’s privileging of indigenous ways of living. The study helped the authors “to realize that the environment is, in fact, people. Because of their dependence on forests for survival, the tribal community had developed a culture geared to the conservation of natural resources.” So indigenous people’s concerns are bound up with the “destruction of forests,” which, as “their life system, has resulted in their impoverishment, indebtedness and in many cases in land alienation and even bondage” (Fernandes 1987: 1).

More specifically:

For centuries they have developed what can be called a constructive dependence on forests that kept a balance between human and ecological needs. They lived in harmony with the forest to such an extent that this relationship has often been described as symbiotic because the total dependence of the forest dweller on the forest is comparable to that of the child on its mother. (1987: 8)

Again, a similar logic pervades Philip Gain's writing. In SEHD's *Bangladesh: Land, Forest and Forest People* (1998), for the heading page of his chapter, Gain includes a picture of Garo girls dancing and a quote from Garo leader Poresh Chandra Mree:

We are the children of the forest. We were born here. We were brought up here. We want to die here. We are so accustomed to forest life that we cannot survive if evicted from the forest. (1998: 27)

Note the reference Mree makes to his people as "children," and also the implication that the Garo are incapable of modernity. In his 2002 *Last Forests of Bangladesh*, Gain appropriates this view of the "forest people" as incapable of anything but forest-dwelling in his dedication:

This book is dedicated to those brave environmentalists and journalists who take the risk of exposing the lies and telling the truth to save the last bits of our natural forests and the forest-dwelling people, *whose life without forests is rendered miserable* (2002: u.p.). [my emphasis]

For Gain, however, the quaintness and simplicity of these forest-dwellers is not only something to be pitied, but there is an innate nobility and knowledge in their culture, one which has been completely lost in the modern developmentalist sensibility. He expounds upon this in the beginning of his chapter in the 1998 publication. The relationship between humans and the environment is naturalized, as humans and forests have been "closely related with each other from the very beginning of human history." The forest people have retained this, as their knowledge of forests is "much more intimate, reciprocal and spiritual." Their sense of ecology is in perfect, non-extractive synchronism with the land. In contrast, "A conflict exists between the forest culture and urban culture." While urban culture "tends only to consume," the culture of the forest

people “protects nature, land, and valuable traditional knowledge” which is passed down through the generations (1998: 29).

While caged in a human rights framework, this logic leads to similar arguments to the ones Burling was making, regarding a type of value of indigenous people that is scientifically and therefore universally valid. According to Gain, in fact, “*The most valuable thing we have lost is knowledge* that has been transferred by the forest communities or indigenous peoples from generation to generation for thousands of years” (1998: 29).

In this section, I have shown that indigenous people are referenced, in environmentalist literature, through a trope of an ecologically noble savage. This view of adivasis of Bangladesh as noble savages continues a tradition stretching at least as far back as Lewin’s 1865 treatise. This contemporary “noble savage” is privileged as an escape from the trappings of modernity and consumerism, and serves as a model of utopic human society for environmentalists.

What this dissertation will proceed to show in later chapters is how contemporary Mandi articulations of identity draw strategically from this discursive reserve while managing to argue strongly *for* certain types of modernist development interventions and against the type of primitive abjection rendered in the above. What the dissertation further will argue is that the desire to incorporate adivasis into another re-rendering as containing the kernel of a radical contestation of the neoliberal state as containing some similar failures of logic and ethics.

In the next section, I sketch the character of James, referencing in particular his ways of rendering himself and his organization as part of a hierarchy of ethics and culpability. Following that, I further this to lead into a discussion about the “climate of suspicion” this type of thinking and politics often entails.

The Director

James, the Director of the Minority and Environment Group (MEG), is a nice-looking guy in his early 40s. He wears a moustache and his slacks and long-sleeved button-down shirt are typical Dhaka professional dress; occasionally he will wear a more “traditional”-looking shirt from one of the Dhaka indigenous craft stores.¹⁷⁹ He is constantly smiling, and carries one of those dispositions that is always comforting and pleasant, yet eventually starts to make you suspicious, wondering whether that smile is forced or just happens to be permanent; a bit of a politician or diplomat, you might say, but one of the good ones.

James legitimates himself and MEG through his national connections, all of the important players he knows and with whom he has worked, like the Chakma chief Raja Devasish Roy, rebel Shanti Bahini army leader Shantu Larma, and renowned professors like political scientist Amena Mohsin. He also talks about his time traveling abroad and the period he spent as a fellow at Yale.

Further, James authenticates through his organization’s singularity, and the actual difference it has made. He talks about being the only organization to cover this event and

¹⁷⁹ Garments made from colorful, woven fabrics marketed as coming from the indigenous people of Bangladesh are expensive, and typically purchased by tourists. Philip notes that he gets especially good prices on these items.

that event, and that may well be true. James is trained as a journalist and has many journalist friends in major Dhaka newspapers, so I take seriously his claim that Bangladeshi journalists (like many American journalists) must often sacrifice the ability to be critical for access, and his claim that intimate connections between government and big media businesses means some stories just won't get covered.¹⁸⁰ MEG tries to circumvent that encumbrance by publishing independently.

James makes claims that imply his organization has single-handedly opposed major development initiatives or brought previously invisible issues to the fore. While that may be questionable, coverage of topics as controversial as Bengali settlement in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the human rights of Bangladesh's sex workers are certainly not mainstream. Despite his personal presentation which is somewhat self-important, James's publications display a certain humility – they are often collaborative, and he rarely includes any kind of autobiography. Despite how central he is to the organization and its writings, his website and books are basically presented as done by MEG, and do not focus on James's individual achievements.

Part of James's claim to countering the mainstream, to being an activist, and to being subversive, is secularism. In a country which claims to be 90% Muslim¹⁸¹, he and other MEG workers (most of whom are Christian or Hindu) often gripe about the wider

¹⁸⁰ A blatant recent environmental example is coverage regarding the Phulbari mining project fiasco, in which story after story was written by journalists who had been whisked away on all-expense-paid trips to Germany to see how well the same company was doing "the exact same type of project" in the Rhineland. Each would return with optimistic news and not-so-insightful commentary like "it works great there, so it will work just fine in Phulbari." Journalists made gross over-estimates not only of an identical landscape in both places, but also that a comparable amount of compensation and infrastructure would be able to be allotted by Bangladesh's government for those persons displaced and those environments impacted by the proposed open-pit mine.

¹⁸¹ Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (2007) <http://www.banbeis.gov.bd/>

Muslim society, drawing connections between religion, governmental corruption, overpopulation, and irresponsible land use. The daily meals served to MEG employees are vegetarian, for reasons of religion and of environmental ethics. James, in his writing and in his speech, sees the encroachment of “land-hungry Bengalis” on “indigenous” lands, noting that “the cultural and psychological conflict between the Bengalis and the ethnic communities is phenomenal.” Although James himself is a Bengali Christian, such talk is clearly not geared for the mainstream community, but rather for liberal secular, indigenous, international, and activist circles.

James seems generally a little annoyed at the tedium of running an organization, when where he really loves to be is in the field, doing photography, research, or relaxing. He has described to me his hometown as “the place with the most trees in Bangladesh.” It is this forested upbringing to which he partially attributes his love of nature.

As an activist and photographer, James is heavily invested in the aesthetics of nature-loving. His writing as well as his photography evokes this aesthetic, one that would be familiar to cosmopolitan individuals interested in environmental issues. He portrays the dismal state of Bangladesh’s natural resources as reflecting an encounter between, at their extremes, a reckless, exploitative global developmentalism and a timeless and tranquil, natural way of life. This allows for the construction of a continuum, and these actors get organized in a hierarchy from complete culpability to innocence, such that:

Imperialist global development

British colonial government

Current Bangladesh government

Modern Bengali Muslims

Traditionalist Bengalis/Christian and Hindu Bengalis

Collaborator/modernizing indigenous people

Traditionalist indigenous people

Although each of these categories has some flexibility in the hierarchy, based on the context of recent actions these groups may or may not have taken regarding environmental preservation, each remains salient in descriptions of the politics of environment in MEG's writing. Yet it is always big development that really pulls the strings. The big donor countries are the ones who really have the interests at stake, and the power to make things happen: the U.S., Shell Oil, Asian Development Bank, and the United Nations Development Project. He, along with many intellectuals, saw the U.S. as instrumental in implementing Bangladesh's "state of emergency" (2006-2008) in Bangladesh, euphemistically termed its caretaker government.

The hierarchy, evidenced in the writing, was partially expounded upon in a conversation I had with James about why our planned trip to the often-volatile Chittagong Hill Tracts region had to be cancelled:

We have received a circular from the government that they are clamping down on organizations like ours, via the cantonment. This is a result of the current military-backed government. We have been receiving much pressure throughout the caretaker government period, but it has gotten much worse lately. The recent activities directed against [former Prime minister] Sheik Hasina are one such effort. They crack down on small corruption cases, but do not tackle the big problems... Prothom Alo [a popular national daily] has not reported anything controversial, but all are under intense pressure and surveillance from military intelligence, even them. If you go

to the CHT, they will stop you, and report to all police stations that someone, a foreigner, is coming. They will follow you around, maintain some distance, but will track you the whole time...

And this military government is backed by the U.S. government. If you follow what the U.S. government does, it is always worse than you think. The donor countries have interests and they are demanding more and more. There are seventeen main donor countries which contribute to the World Bank and other funding projects, and they are looking for much more than repayment. They want control.

As James investigates the environment and the rights of indigenous people in Bangladesh, he is often critical of the government, especially in its collusion with foreign interests. His organization is sometimes controversial, but rarely radical, at least to an international audience. How relevant is his mission to the larger society in Bangladesh, or on a global scale? Put differently, how can we understand his organization and their mission in a larger field of social and political processes?

Suspicion at MEG

This is what the British did in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The missionaries, they come, and they make people suspicious. Like Father Homrich calls all Muslim males Shek – he'll say Robi Khan is a Shek. He says he is taking the land. I said to him, no, he is not taking the land, it is her [Deepa Duzzel's] land. He said well, fine. But I know when he talks to other people he will criticize Robi Khan. He and the other missionary [in Jolchatro, Father Shushanto] will speak against him. And they have made them hate the Bengali Muslim people. They have injected this mentality into the Garos,¹⁸² this mentality of hatred and prejudice, suspicion.

...In the CHT, the missionaries turned them [the Chakma, Marma, and other groups] against the Bengalis. There is huge conversion right now in the CHT. There are Italians coming over the Indian border. And it was a false insurgency. Sheik Mujib said something immature [that the minority ethnic groups should "become Bengali"] and they went to Delhi and the Chakma mounted a false insurgency. And look what has come of it. ... All these organizations actually have a destructive effect, World Vision, Caritas. I will write an exposé book on Christianity in Modhupur. I have over 100,000 pictures.

...And IPAC came in and offered Father Homrich money. He wants the money. The missionaries are controlling everything. They run the scene. Missionaries can give sermons in church, but they should not be controlling everything. Father Homrich treats the Garos like he is the mother and they are the chicks. But what will happen in 20 years? How are they being benefitted?

¹⁸² An etic and more widely-known term for the people who call themselves Mandi in Bangladesh, as well as groups in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya. Considered by some, but certainly not most, to be offensive.

...ADB and World Bank have destroyed the place. And now IPAC is coming in trying to say, oh, we will save the forests. Where were they? Nishorgo, and now they have changed the name. They are getting money from the oil companies. They want people to think oh, the American government is helping the environment...

...These organizations like Oxfam GB, they are only for British interests. These Garo leaders are threatened that Robi will get the money. Well, I said to Eugene Nokrek, there are 100,000 acres under banana cultivation and you are making an issue over this one woman's 3 acres?

...These [Garo] leaders, though, they are only about cash. They will follow you as long as there is cash coming in. They want immediate payment.

...Actually, the Garos, they have a certain mindset. It's simple, but there is something. They are agriculturalists of a different sort. They are not like the Bengali farmers. Bengali farmers are very hard-working. Garos just lease out their lands for profit. They are very well-off. They are doing well. Their literacy rate is higher than the national average. And in every village you will find 20 or 30 girls have left to come to work in the beauty parlors in Dhaka.

This is a relatively un-edited snippet of conversation. Although I agree with some of this critique of missionaries and some of the negative ramifications of NGO work in Modhupur, what I want to illustrate here is the amazing fluidity with which the speaker drifts from accusation to accusation in a relatively brief conversation. In the span of a few minutes, he goes from implicating colonial British missionaries to a current American missionary, to a Bengali missionary, to Italians, to the Chakma people, to World Vision and Caritas, to Christianity in general, back to the American missionary, to ADB and World Bank, to IPAC and its former incarnation Nishorgo, to oil companies, to Oxfam GB, to Garo leaders in general, to Garo people in general.

This statement was made by James, the head of one of the more important advocacy NGOs in Bangladesh for both *adivasi* and environmental issues. The organization has also undertaken smaller projects on the rights of prostitutes and governmental transparency, and is focused on these issues from the perspective of investigative and advocacy journalism. As such, it stands poised to present a relatively

controversial and cohesive challenge to some of the more exploitative machinations of power in contemporary Bangladesh. Whether it has succeeded in that possibility is a complex question, but it has exposed and brought to the fore to some extent these under-explored marginalizations.

Taken in isolation, several of the implications James asserts here make sense, but when strung together so closely, they come off almost as paranoid ramblings, or at least an extremely conspiratorial view of the world. I also would point out the racial stereotyping of both the Chakma and Garo people, both of which James has written about and ostensibly advocated for. This stereotyping, further, is positioned not so away in the statement from a denunciation of the stereotyping of Muslims and Bengalis. While James's paranoia may to some degree be above the norm, what it is assuredly not is singular or even particularly exceptional. What it is representative of are the constant paranoias and accusations, some of them genuinely felt and others perhaps strategically deployed, in the NGO world.

James and his organization were far from the only NGO actors I witnessed as deeply enmeshed in what I call the "climate of suspicion" characteristic of Bangladesh's NGO sector in this moment. Most of the actors I encountered in this sector were both, on one hand, objects of extreme suspicion by others and, on the other hand, were very suspicious of others themselves.

Although this "climate of suspicion" is multi-faceted in its origins, I read it partially as symptomatic of larger structures and shifts in the way NGOs are operating in Bangladesh. That is, I call attention to the climate of suspicion as intimately tied to

several of the themes of the previous chapter: waning of positive relationships in NGO networks, decreasing separation between NGOs and the state, and the increasing focus on entrepreneurialism; in sum, the “bureaucratization and professionalization” that reinforce an extremely competitive NGO environment. Ironically, the most common lines along which NGOs in Modhupur are competing for legitimacy is the way in which they are funded. That is, while on one hand, an NGO may be judged as in the pocket of foreign donors if they are perceived as being wholly dependent on such external funding, the most common charge in this NGO world is “They are making profit”. So the appropriation of neoliberal and entrepreneurial ideals or ways of operating is, for many, the antithesis of what an NGO should embody.

Perhaps furthering this irony is that the NGO president quoted above is currently in the process of shifting some of his resources to a medicinal plant nursery operation, operating under a similar non-profit status, but operating as a farm specifically geared toward producing high-value medicinal plants for use in the pharmaceutical industry. As James lamented to me on several occasions, “I can’t keep doing this forever. Things are changing.” Far from the only actor who articulated a general weariness with the NGO sector, I would say almost every current or former NGO worker I came to know well expressed similar sentiments to me at some point.

Conclusion: The Wilderness and Its Tribal

Environmental issues are surely salient, as the country directly encounters several environmental calamities a year, with fingers being increasingly pointed toward man-

made impacts by the popular press. Yet at the same time, pleas like James Gain's for preservation of more forests in their "natural" states (as opposed to prevailing developmental models touting responsible land use) often fall rather flat in a country that is the most densely populated in the world, excepting a few tiny island nations like Singapore, Malta, Maldives, and Bahrain. Bangladesh has over 1,000 people per square kilometer. (The U.S. has around 30, for comparison.)¹⁸³ MEG's optimism, romanticism, and commitment are surely inspiring, but it remains to be seen whether this kind of politics will be an instrumental one in addressing Bangladesh's many environmental challenges.

I have explored AUG and MEG as part of the development and human rights discourse on environmentalism and indigeneity in Bangladesh. In environmentalist discourse, sentiments regarding trees and forests are negotiated. Ideas of the land and people's sentiments regarding it are activated and reinscribed. Notions of the indigenous and the tribal are also activated as emotional registers. Two themes which emerge are the idea of the empty wilderness and the idea of the tribal. Both of these are often constructed (here and elsewhere) as others, as the other side of the boundary. As such, the wilderness is often seen as something to be feared, rife with spirits and dangers; the standard modernist reading would be that these spaces had to be tamed by modernity. Though portrayed in more polite terms, developmentalist discourse still views the wilderness as needing to be managed properly by humans. Yet environmentalist discourse draws on other themes which laud the empty environment as a realm of the unspoiled, the pristine.

¹⁸³ United Nations World Population Prospects (2005). <http://esa.un.org/unpp/>

Privileged or denigrated, the figure of the indigenous person is part and parcel of that wilderness environment. Anna Tsing (2005) observes this phenomenon:

Forests are recognizable around the world only to the extent that they are empty and wild, the shadows of civilization. Where indigenous people are recognized within them, international discussion makes the people wild things too, assimilated to the wild emptiness of the forest. Their social lives come out to meet the international public only across a deep abyss; they flit through the forest like birds. (2005: 202)

In a similar operation, and one in which person and environment is conflated, the indigenous and the tribal are re-imagined as residing in a state of purity. It is taken for granted in this type of environmental discourse that the timeless tribal existed at one with his environment before the taint of modernity. Formerly the frightening other, to be brought into modernity or cast aside as museum-piece, the tribal is now part and parcel of the struggle for environmentalism.

What is also clear is that these symbols of environmental and cultural purity arise as another construction in which the enlightened discourse of the West must bring the great ignorant mass of nations up to speed. In the case of MEG's writing, however, the government of Bangladesh and international development organizations like the ADB and the UNDP are criticized as culprits who are taking advantage of the lack of environmental awareness in Bangladesh. This is a critique of modernism, of unrestrained development, and both takes modernity to task on its own terms (statistically, constant development is unsustainable) and outside of its terms, lauding the beauty of that which it has not touched. It remains to be seen to what extent the possibility is open that these ideas can achieve some amount of widespread legitimacy in Bangladesh, especially given population and resource pressures or the importance of forestry as a subset of agriculture

in its national GDP¹⁸⁴. How do these terms relate to the strategies of neoliberalism, in which governments, especially “Third World” ones, are imagined as completely inept, giving way to far more trustworthy governance of internationally-financed corporations and NGOs?

In the next chapter, I focus in primarily on AUG and detail their role in representing Mandi culture. I then elaborate on public forms of Mandiness and Mandi celebration, particularly via Wangala festivals. In these celebrations, again the underlying implication I read is that these festivals, via international indigeneity and NGO culture, draw on Orientalized representations and relegations of adivasi to the realm of the “cultural”, while at the same time providing a whole other set of benefits I wish to emphasize.

¹⁸⁴ According to the Bangladesh Forest Department, 5%, which does not include “fuelwood and other minor forest products practically free of cost.” <http://www.bforest.gov.bd/>

Chapter 3 – Wangala, Representation, and Cultural Barriers to “Progress”

“[T]his must not be seen as an accidental inconsistency in an individual's thought - this mismatch between the twentieth-century celebration of the 'primitive' culture of poetry and the disavowal of the 'primitive' in historical and political terms... [I]t was the very act of culturization of 'tribal' practices that made them resistant to interpretative use by historians, which also prevented an adequate political mobilization of such practices... [O]ne could even say that culturization was actually meant to prevent a full mobilization of 'tribal' political agency, for that would require relinquishing the developmental basis of our politics, which even today fails to imagine a future beyond the incremental promise of progress, modernization and advancement. The 'tribe' as culture and the 'tribe' as political, therefore, remained in an irresolvable double-bind, that even today continues to plague movements of autonomy and self-determination amongst them.” (Banerjee 2006: 125)

“The Wangala festival is not a thing to keep our identity, no? Wangala is not the means to keep our own identity, but rather, consciousness, how to our keep our land in our possession, and how to keep practicing our own language. This is the main thing. So keeping *my path* okay. Then one can learn any kind of language, no? So it is not those cultural festivals. But if I let my language be abolished? Or if I let my land be lost? What does it matter if I am keeping my ‘style’?” – Anthony Marak, Mandi leader, personal communication

In this chapter, I examine public representations of Mandiness, exploring some of the ways an exoticized adivasi is figured at the local level. I argue that contemporary Mandi identity claims draw heavily on ideas of indigeneity circulating through NGO circles, and that these claims also involve a self-cataloguing and self-ethnicizing. Mandi identity also draws on ideas more specific to “Mandiness,” including ideas about Christianity and what the modern Mandi labor force looks like. I focus primarily on cultural performance and practice, that are mainly geared toward other Mandi, yet which also offer, to those outsiders interested (primarily NGO and governmental actors), a window into Mandi culture. Following the presentation of four Mandi harvest festivals, I also outline another context in which Mandi cultural performance takes place. I describe a typical (primarily Bengali) NGO event that involves, as its “cultural” performance,

Mandi song and dance. Through this event, I argue that the sexualization of indigenous female bodies is central to the way the potential of the “indigenous” is limited in Bangladesh, and is particularly salient in the rural spaces in which adivasis live in voyeuristic contexts as cultural performances and as tourist spectacles. Yet, I also read anxieties about public sexualization of female Mandi bodies as manifested most saliently in Mandi *men*’s talk about the protection of women and men’s own anxieties about gender and sexual protection from (Bengali Muslim) outsiders.

A central debate for the Mandi is authenticity in cultural practice. Authenticity is central to how scholars have conceptualized ethnic nationalism and ethnic identity claims (Bendix 1997), and how they understand the discourse and repercussions of nativism and indigeneity. Further, authenticity is key to understanding museumization and folklorization of “the tribal” worldwide, and in South Asia and Bangladesh in particular, where it is seen most prominently in human rights NGO and governmental contexts deploying the register of ethnology. Most importantly for our present concern, authenticity is key to the ways in which Mandi understand and debate, primarily internally, cultural practice, performance, and representation.

First, I contextualize the Mandi-run non-governmental organization Adivasi Upliftment Group (AUG) in terms of representation of the Mandi. While AUG is viewed as “representing” the Mandi politically, they also serve as cultural mediators for another kind of Mandi representation, filtering and showcasing “culture” to the outside world and to Mandi themselves. I then detail several distinct Mandi festivals, as well as briefly

reference a wedding festivity, to delineate some of the various ways that cultural festivals matter to Mandis. Among the leadership at AUG, as well as other Mandi “conscious” (English word often used to denote “educated”) males, these festivities are an axis of contestation over the importance and role of Mandi cultural performance and cultural practice as a whole. Through these conversations Mandi debate the current valences of modernity versus tradition, and also the role alcohol may play in traditional culture versus what is perceived as proper development. In other words, they debate what is to be done with alcohol consumption at once considered central to Mandi festivals and culture and as threatening to “progress.” More fundamentally, how do these debates reflect a concern with “authenticity” that is central to Mandi concerns about the future?

AUG as a Cultural Mediator

Elected leadership at AUG is to some extent reflective of political dynamics, that is, the ability of families to garner votes through kinship allegiances. However, it is also reflective of the general mood of locals, insofar as how Mandi view their current situation and their futures, including through their relationship with the larger (Bengali and international) world. That mood takes account of development priorities and opportunities, and is invested in the deployment of “culture.” The extent to which leadership at organizations like the AUG are able to mobilize community cohesion is frequently invested in “culture,” as is the leadership’s ability to represent the group to outsiders. Debates about proper leadership at the AUG and other, similar “IPO”s

(Indigenous Peoples' Organizations), further, recall debates delineating and contesting notions of "tradition" versus "modernity," a constant refrain in the way forward.

While tradition and modernity are key axes of contestation nearly everywhere in the world, they are perhaps more critical in those (post-colonial) places in which modernity is constantly being mapped as both similar to and exotic to a pre-formed Western notion of modernity. As Partha Chatterjee argues, nation-building in the post-colony has had to wrest with articulating a realm apart from the colonizer, often envisioned as a "spiritual" modality, while at the same time deploying a public politics in line with "becoming modern" (1993). But within those nations, glaring examples of perceived "primitiveness", such as the figure of the "tribal" or adivasi presents a challenge to the representation of the state as modern.

What the figure of the adivasi has the potential to represent is vital to understanding the cultural or multi-cultural content of the nation-state. Due to adivasis' discursive positioning as always prior in time, the figure has the potential to represent what is most wrong and most right with "tradition." It often represents these things to outsiders through links with international human rights and development organizations, and also to churches, particularly keen on protecting adivasis and other minorities. Whether Bangladesh wrangles with the question of adivasi inclusion or, alternately, provisions of exception, as much as it should is a separate question. In spaces like Modhupur, the question of adivasi positioning relative to these problems of modernity *feels* vital, and the amount of resources for development that go into the question are very considerable.

AUG as Leadership

Mandis often complain that they lack leadership, that historically, their societies have been relatively acephalous, and that this remains a barrier to community cohesion. Families tend to follow kinship allegiances for loyalty, and loyalties become split amongst a larger community that considers itself “Mandi.” Mandi as a cohesive community is a far more common referent than what “type” of Mandi one is, although most are familiar with these categories. Inter-marriage between various types of Mandi is relatively unproblematic, as well as marriage between related people from distinct geographical communities. But Mandis don’t necessarily have a tradition of centralized leadership. Rather, there are various heads of households who are considered leaders, headmen of a sort.

AUG in particular, but also other organizations, formed to try to represent and to speak for Mandis. The extent to which they do is a subject for debate within the community, but their position as representatives is crucial and recognized. Whether a particular community member considers AUG’s current leaders to be charlatans or heroes, these leadership positions are still recognized.

Criticisms of leadership are revealing. A common criticism is that they have “had their time,” and are simply not “with it” any more. New leadership is required, so out with the old, in with the new. Another criticism is that leadership is to some extent hypocritical, and this comes in a variety of ways. One of the most common and damning is the assertion that leaders are “in league with” organizations like IPAC (Integrated Protected Area Co-Management) or the Forest Department, which have far-reaching

reputations for having nefarious means and goals. This is often phrased in the abstract – that current leadership is being too acquiescent. Anthony Marak, a respected elder of Chunia village, lays out this criticism, while presenting the influx of Bengalis as evidence:

Anthony Marak: The leadership, who are actually playing these roles—leadership in our community, it's a huge problem. There is no coordination, right? They who are actually playing the roles, like leadership roles, social roles—actually many of them don't think enough about the society, right? Or how we can maintain our existence and futures for our future generations? Instead, all the time they are thinking of their own interest. So this is one kind of serious problem. Leadership should solve many kinds of problems, of our own community, no? Or any kind of quarrels created. Between Bengalis and adivasis, or adivasis and adivasis. They should stand to the correct side, but they are actually not doing it.

Me: Who do you mean by leaders, do you mean the local chairman, or some of the NGO leaders like Partha Mrong and David Simsang?

Anthony: There are so many 'leaders'! (laughing) Yeah, yeah, actually all are like this. Mm. You ask them, where their addresses are, in their villages. You can see that many are Bengali majority. And where our adivasi leaders are, their sons and others, they are not taught their mother tongue! They are practicing Bengali all the time! Many leaders' home villages have been given over to the Bengalis. Out of 100 families, maybe only 10 families will be adivasis. 90 families will be Bengali, surrounding them. In Gaira, Gachabari, Jolchatro, these have been given over, no? In Jolchatro, they actually can't speak in their mother tongue, no? They have lost their language. Language and land, no? This is the fundamental point. It must be preserved, to keep the security of society and also to give the community a unique identity. Language is the most important, isn't it? If I've already lost my language, what consciousness do I have?

For Anthony, a respected leader in his village who would soon contest AUG leadership in an upcoming election, protection of land is absolutely critical, yet so is language. Although Anthony disavows the practice of Wangala festivals as “culture” having little relevance to Mandi survival or politics, he views language as integral to maintaining a unique identity. Although Anthony works directly with IPAC, an organization that many Mandi consider threatening Mandi autonomy from the outside, he

criticizes leaders for often being too acquiescent to other outside forces. In other words, Anthony's views on the right way forward for Mandi leaders are complex and nuanced, reflecting ongoing debates among the Mandi about what aspects of adivasi identity are most crucial – should Mandi in Modhupur continue the more oppositional stance they have adopted toward the Forest Department and conservation groups in the past, or should they work within the “co-management” paradigms being offered to them? Should Mandi promote an alterity that revitalizes Sangsarek practices like the Wangala, or should they culturally align themselves more with Western Christianity?

Yet another criticism is that, put simply, IPOs are misrepresenting Garo culture. Particularly at the *Wangala* harvest festivals, the charge is that this watered-down facsimile of a Garo cultural event is contrived and inauthentic. Identity runs deeper than choreographed song and dance, and is not really genuine if provided to the public and served as a product, so the criticism goes – if Mandi cultural practices continue, let them continue, but let's not falsify ourselves in order to meet some standard of what is “culture” from either inside or outside. This stance is somewhat akin to the move within anthropology away from images of static and museumized culture.

Organizations like the AUG are sometimes, if nothing else, de facto leaders, and often act as “fixers” for journalists, film crews, or others coming to record and represent Mandi culture. Sometimes, they might even act as “fixers” for “fixers,” in the case of international journalists or NGO staff being shown around the country or the site by a mid-level fixer who then consults AUG. Much of the work of translation and representation takes place among these levels of fixers and translators. While chapter 2

introduced the work of adivasi representation through the setting of NGOs, this chapter shows this work through cultural festivals. The next section reads the valences of cultural festivals, often a source for debate about what is authentic Mandi culture, and about cultural practices' role in development modernity.

Cultural Festivals

For the hosts of “cultural events” like the Wangala harvest festival, weddings, or funerals, such an event might mean an enormous financial expenditure, but also a way to reaffirm status and to cement bonds of kinship and community. To the extent that churches (in the Mandi villages of Modhupur, primarily Catholic) may be involved, a cultural event might provide a way to pay homage to Mandi “cultural” ways of being while serving to regulate and monitor, through the involvement of the church, the nowadays subtle ways in which churches continue to appropriate and to modernize perceived “earlier” ways of being. An NGO may be involved, and see such an event as an opportunity to advertise their brand, collect photographic evidence of their donor-sponsored support, and perform some of the affective work of NGOs. Even a high government official or a foreign ambassador may attend one of these events, hoping to display his support for a minor but vibrantly “cultural” constituency such as the Mandi. In this way, cultural festivals, especially the Wangala, may serve as inroads for promotion of development agendas, as local leader David Simsang mentions about a 2011 Wangala:

They housed [U.S. Ambassador James Moriarty] in the minister housing in Dhanbari. They came, wanting to distribute loans through the forest department. Another 5,000

families will get some amount of money, and then 200 trees per each family. 5,000! I think it's supported by the USAID or US government. Therefore, they invited the US ambassador and the District Forest Officer to present – the DFO [District Forest Officer], the District Commissioner, they were all present at our Wangala. The minister described the project, how they want to give us “alternative livelihoods.” Our people should not depend on the forest was the speech they gave at the Wangala. And the Ambassador sponsors that project!

In chapter 5, I will detail some of the critiques from David and other leaders of what they say is offensively a “rehabilitation” project. In addition to serving the function of offering a forum for public persuasion about development projects and NGO legitimacy, the Mandi festivals, particularly the harvest festival Wangala, have become prominent symbols of distinctive Mandi culture. If you ask a Mandi in Modhupur about his or her culture, particularly in public display, the Wangala is sure to come up. The extent to which the tradition of Wangala is ongoing, however, is not generally agreed upon. Some will tell you absolutely they are, while others will assure you they are not. Organizers continue to refer to festivals as Wangala, so the statement that there are no more Wangalas is an indirect statement about the potential inauthenticity of those celebrations.

Ellen Bal (2010) argues that contemporary Wangala festivals are of a relatively recent, revivalist origin, though they do not necessarily reflect any overt messages or influences of Christianity. Mahmudul Sumon (2012) notes that young Mandi activists have, even more recently, begun organizing their own Wangala festivals, often explicitly describing them as in contrast to less authentic NGO and Church-sponsored festivals.

However, the majority of Wangalas, and certainly the more visible ones, are often sponsored by the Catholic Church or one or more NGOs, which actually makes the

Wangala a modest source of income in a sense rather than a large expenditure. This is part of why they are derided by many Mandis. In addition, there is a sense that the harvest festivals are of the past, and therefore not appropriate to contemporary Mandi society. In any case, without sponsorship, the festivals remain prohibitively expensive (to provide food and rice beer for so many guests), and therefore the disappearance of the celebrations is often explained as a practical matter. Missionary practice in the past (not in the present) of taking action against indigenous forms of celebration is also cited.

These various valences are summarized by David:

The Wangalas we have now are “cultural programs,” not traditional. In Joynagacha, normally it’s not done in a natural way, I don’t think. We organize it, but I think in the future gradually it will become unnatural. Because once upon a time we lost it. Though still there is some amount of traditional Wangala in Joynagacha, organized in the traditional way. Wangala or Rongchugala. Originally, it was a Sangsarek belief, and up to just 20 or 30 years back there was such a thing. Still they have some traditional *puja*. They worship their traditional gods and goddesses (chuckling). But when we jointly organize the function, it’s not natural. Just a cultural function and speeches. Normally in Wangala there are no speeches (laughing), just drinking and dancing. No speeches! That’s just not natural.

Inauthenticity and the constructedness of such activities are explicit in David’s recurrent reference to “the natural.”

Below, I detail four such festivals: three *Wangalas* and one *Rongchugala*. The temptation is to view these festivals on a continuum from less to more organic, from less to more local, and from less to more “authentic.” This is, indeed, how I as an ethnographer experienced them, how they were presented to me by the vast majority of my informants. However, the goal here is to map the current diversity of this type of public cultural production and understand them as a key part of a debate about

authenticity, rather than to mark them as more or less authentic, which also implies more or less traditional and is associated with a premodern past. Many of my informants label and experience them as such. Thus, reading these festivals partly outlines Mandi debates about authenticity and “appropriate” culture.

None of these festivals was particularly engaged in Orientalized representation or in rendering Mandi or adivasi culture as primitive, although timelessness in “tradition” is read in Mandi songs and dances. All were planned and organized by Mandi themselves, and some were more exclusively Mandi and others more for a broader public. Nor was the purpose of any of these festivals to highlight oppression or abjection. They are celebrations of a culture and ethnicity, though as Bal argues, they are actually a relatively recent appropriation of themes of global indigeneity and asserted cultural similarity with “hill” Garos across the border in India. What becomes suspect for many Modhupur Mandi about these festivals is that they are typically sponsored from outside, and seem artificial as such. Debates surround which of these points should be emphasized.

Another purpose for recounting these festivals is to show one of the key ways in which NGOs and NGO funds are involved in identity production and identity maintenance for the Mandi. The function provided by NGO-sponsored cultural production is somewhat that of sanitation – to provide for public consumption an image of Mandi culture that is somewhat publicly acceptable, that stays within the limits of public tolerance, yet also within bounds of publicly acceptable culture and alterity (Povinelli 2002). They also function as a key part of “the stuff IPOs do” and their reason for being, providing a familiar and digestible format of cultural preservation and

celebration. The festivals exemplify what I have argued in chapter 2 is a key role for IPOs: cultural production divorced from its context for public consumption, and therefore a different kind of cultural production.

Given this sanitation function, many scholars have argued that adivasi “folklorization” has, on one hand, disabled historically oppositional stances of adivasis in the political realm, while at the same time being internalized in a destructive way:

Adivasis, through the twentieth century, had been deliberately displaced into the domain of culture and nothing but pure culture - such that today, even the self-aware Adivasi herself seems to be seeking her primary identity in an aesthetic space of songs and festivals, away from the everyday. Yet the very same 'poetic' Adivasi, for the sake of a political agency, seems to be waiting for a culture - a culture that would be amenable to political mobilization, and perhaps, at the end of a long wait, true historicization. (Banerjee 2006: 126)

Here Banerjee reads the emphasis on performative “culture” as detracting from adivasi political possibility, and also as lamentable and implicitly empty and inauthentic: “the domain of culture and nothing but pure culture.” I challenge both of these common readings in this chapter. I concede that outside representations (museumization and the rendering of adivasi bodies as objects of tourism, detailed in chapter 5) discursively impact adivasi political possibility, and also that festivals and songs do provide an aesthetic space “away from the everyday.” However, I disagree that this “culture,” even if recently invented tradition (Bal 2010), should be read as empty or inauthentic. Rather, what I see happening in Modhupur is Mandis deploying references to global indigeneity as a means of uniting, celebrating belonging and alterity while not losing sight of the political.

Kaushik Ghosh has argued that the history of adivasi revolt, which has posed a significant challenge to the modernizing state in India, renders the transnational discourse of indigeneity not only inapplicable, but destructive to adivasi avenues of survival and state resistance that have worked historically (Ghosh 2006). Ghosh's models of divergent state practices he terms "exclusive" and "incorporative governmentality" in policy and practice toward adivasis in India provide a useful analytic for understanding the broad strokes of policy in East Pakistan and then Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh's "incorporation" has been largely rhetorical rather than substantive, while "exclusivity" in both former East Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh have provided far less in terms of special provisions and measures of regional autonomy than in India, and reflect more a basic denial and ignoring of ethnic minority populations (Bal 2010, Karim 1998). As Bal historicizes: "The acknowledgement that 'tribal' minorities are in need of special attention on the basis of their distinct cultures, experiences, socio-political circumstances, etc. is – unlike in India – a new development in Bangladesh" (2010).

Both Banerjee and Ghosh highlight important facets of the history of adivasi politics in relation to folklorization and indigeneity, respectively. In addition to the historical differences between state policies in India and Bangladesh, however, I diverge from their approaches in two ways. First, their analysis references broad strokes of history and social-cultural theory, whereas my argument is more modest and ethnographic. Second, lamentations about the co-optations of indigeneity, culture, and self-folklorization, I argue, may lean toward a certain type of yearning on the part of social theorists toward the revolutionary, a politics with which many scholars would

sympathize. However, there may be a level of “slotting” in these albeit astute and historically-rooted analyses that wish for present-day adivasis a type of counter-hegemony that, at least in the context of Bangladesh, Mandi may have very little everyday interest in or use for.

Moving on to the ethnography, I will start with 1) an urban Wangala in the capital city of Dhaka, before moving to the Modhupur Forest Area and detailing 2) a Wangala put on by AUG for the public, 3) a Wangala sponsored by the government, but which had a very local component to it, and 4) a Rongchugala put on by a village with no component of display to the outside, Bengali public. I then conclude with a cultural performance for Bengalis at an NGO festival.

The Wangala in Dhaka

The first Wangala I discuss takes place in the bustling and densely populated capital city of Dhaka. While it is certainly not the only festival to take place in Dhaka, it was one of the larger ones in the winter of 2011.

The Dhaka Wangalas function differently than many more local, rural events. Formal and with a similar layout to the predominantly Bengali Anti-Corruption Fair or Agricultural Fair detailed later, the Dhaka Wangalas nevertheless remain mostly Mandi events. In fact, they are some of *the* Mandi events. They are yearly chances for “*amader Garo adivasi* (our Garo indigenous people)” to gather and celebrate as a majority-in-context (of the fair) in the city, somewhat publicly, but in a welcoming space. Rather than being consumed primarily by the majority Bengali public as “ethnic” (cultural)

entertainment, it is primarily Mandi viewing the Mandi cultural performances – thousands of cheering Mandis of both genders and all ages, although women were predominant as they come to Dhaka to work in far greater numbers. A small space somewhat secluded for that day and time from the pressures of the Bengali majority culture, the Wangala provided a relaxed place of temporary Mandiness. The vibe of cultural celebration was comparable to the yearly U.N. “World Indigenous Day,” also celebrated in Dhaka, which operates similarly in being a separate adivasi space for celebration, although it is pan-adivasi (not just Mandi) and also an event of rights-based politics attended by higher-up, (some globally) connected leadership.

Set in the Gulshan Model School & College courtyard, the Mandi Dhaka Wangala consisted of a stage area covered with a large and well-decorated tent flanked by booths, as is the custom for festivals in Bangladesh. However, the majority of booths were not NGO booths, but rather booths selling Mandi-gear clothing and cultural goods, including Catholic and Protestant religious paraphernalia (framed portraits of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and Mother Theresa). Even the *cha-wallahs* (tea sellers) and snack vendors were Mandi (extremely rare in Dhaka, and even in Modhupur). The main cultural item for sale, by far, was the *dokmanda*, a wrap skirt worn by Mandi women, but rarely in a more Bengali-majority mixed urban settings.

Food was typical snack fare like *shingara* and *samucho* (fried pastries with chickpea or meat fillings) with a few more Mandi-gear items, but neither pork nor rice wine could be found in public. The Dhaka Wangala, like the Transparency Fair, was too Muslim of a space (despite its relative seclusion, it was centrally located in the wealthy

and foreign-oriented Gulshan area) for such cultural indiscretions toward the Bengali Muslim majority as alcohol and pork. Representative of the Modhupur area was my friend “Prince Edward,” Edward Mangshan, a travelling purveyor of Mandi cultural goods.



Figure 6 - A Wangala festival in Dhaka

Most of the crowd seemed in particularly good spirits. This festival, while officially organized, represented a celebration of ethnicity, of Mandi culture, but perhaps more than that, of being Mandi, of being able to mingle freely with the opposite sex, of women able to go around in public without being marked as transgressing gender norms.

The temporary (one to two-day) delineation of the space of a school courtyard, while not formally enforced by denying Bengalis or *bideshis* (foreigners) entrance, marks a boundary inside which Mandi norms of gender are dominant. Further, this delineation of space amplifies the opportunities and possibilities of Mandi success in business and education, without the taint of their minority status in Dhaka and in broader Bangladesh. Mandis often express pride in their success in becoming educated and becoming “modern,” via the Church and NGO opportunities. The perceived barrier, in contrast, is Bengali networks of patronage that often close them to the kinds of assimilation that the government envisions (Burling 1997). This festival felt like a culmination of Mandi peoples’ potential. While it bears little resemblance to a village-level Wangala, it is a good time to celebrate Mandi-ness.

Mandi-ness was on display in the forms of cultural groups discussed above, females in red dress ranging from just above toddler age to young unmarried women. Groups of young boys danced, as well as an older group of men and women, and a strong male singer rendered Mandi songs. Sponsored by large, urban-based NGOs and churches, this event is key to the maintenance of Mandi identity community, particularly among the large numbers of Mandi migrants to Dhaka.

The following Wangala and Rongchugala events, in contrast to the above, all take place in and around the Modhupur forest area. They also are near-exclusively Mandi events, but are much smaller than the Dhaka Wangalas. Nonetheless, they attract attention in national media as a “legitimate” sort of cultural event and an indication of

tolerable “tribal” culture in Bangladesh, and representative of Bangladesh’s cultural diversity. They also act as venues for the exchange of NGO ideas, programs, and practices, and as sources for understanding Mandi culture, and ways of connecting with it, for some. For other, more skeptical Mandis such as the young activists interviewed by Sumon (2012), they represent mere façade and imitation, an example of NGO infiltration and sanitization, a point emphasized in Banerjee’s rendering of the folklorization of the adivasi.

These localized, village cultural festivals share both similarities and differences with the Dhaka Wangala. Below, I describe four of these confluences, starting with the most public of the Modhupur cultural festivals I detail, the Wangala in Gaira. Following my descriptions, I will read their valences, as both representative of NGO re-presentation of culture and of connection with a feeling of Mandiness.

Wangala in Gaira

The Wangala celebration in Gaira, a town located north of Modhupur and not too far from the main highway connecting the cities of Tangail and Mymensingh, was a public but primarily Mandi event. The Wangala signified Garo (the more widely used term for Mandi, particularly among outsiders) representation to the (Bengali Muslim) public, and as such, was a somewhat watered-down and publicly acceptable affair, though not as official or conciliatory to Bengali Muslim expectations of propriety in consumption practices (wine and pork were served). At the same time, while it felt like a

very public spectacle, it represented local concerns rather than national or even regional ones. The “VIP” (Very Important Person) invited guests were primarily local officials, the most notable being the (temporary, non-local but stationed there) Chief Forest Officer and the Chief of Police.

Hanging behind the Wangala was the familiar “event sign” (common at events throughout Bangladesh) describing the event; in the case of well-funded urban events, these are often printed and may contain English as well as Bengali writing. In the case of village events, these are typically painted on cloth and contain Bangla only. The sign reads (translated):

Wangala – 2010

Location: Gaira Nokma Mr. Ronin Simsang’s Home

Date: Friday, 12th November, 2010

Participants:

Gaira villagers, Adivasi Upliftment Group, Adivasi Cluster Unnoyon Forum, VDC (Gaira Joloi, Telki)

Gaira Salmikhang Jubo Shongho, Tribal Welfare Association – Modhupur Upazilla Shakha

Sponsors: Oxfam GB, World Vision Jolchatro ADP, and IPDS

Though this is a local affair, its connection with broader sources of funding, including international sources, is advertised. Oxfam Great Britain and World Vision are enormous organizations based in the West; this is a chance, however imagined, to showcase Garo culture to the world. The Wangala’s most easily visible function is to solidify networks of local NGO leaders, politicians, and actors, often those who exercise monopolies of violence and legitimated bureaucratic control (the police, military, and forest department) in the community. However, this function is also caged in the language of digestible culture and celebration, as well as international support from

organizations such as Oxfam and World Vision. (IPDS stands for Indigenous Peoples' Development Services, and is a Garo-owned NGO by the celebrated Sunjip Drong. It is national and based in Dhaka but has branches in most Garo areas of the country.) Particularly striking about this sign is the inclusion of the "Gaira villagers" as officially legitimate participants, quite a formalization of what would be assumed about a village Wangala – the villagers are *the* participants and the hosts; yet here, they are invited guests to a formal affair. The sign interpellates the villagers as part of a performance of cultural festival rather than as hosts.

The event was structured much like any Bangladeshi *onusthan* ("program") – a series of speeches by organizers and invited guests that closely follow a formal structure. Each important guest is expected to begin his (or her) speech by acknowledging all of the important guests, a process that can itself take quite some time, followed by an acknowledgement and explanation of the events themselves.

The festival's religious aspect was carefully compartmentalized as well, conducted by a Joynagacha man known to most only as "*Thakur*" ("priest"). Basking somewhat in his moment of fame, Thakur remained perched under the sign, smoking cigarettes for the majority of the ceremony, but at one point was called to duty. He made food offerings around the center pole of the tent to the *mite* (spirits), and then performed a dance with wooden shield and sword, with drum and horn accompaniment. Although dressed in his best *dhoti*, Thakur's class position was clearly distinct among the educated

and important guests, and he was not invited to the VIP's table for lunch.



Figure 7 - A Wangala festival in Gaira

Food was served on banana leaves to the majority of the guests, while special guests like the police commissioner, the DFO, and myself were served on formal plates at a table, indoors, by a cadre of Mandi women, along with plenty of their own supply of rice beer, and the valued *bicchi* (the “pure” rice alcohol, closer to the alcoholic content of a weak liquor, before being watered down for consumption as *chu*, beer). The District Forest Officer, relatively new to the station, is Chakma, from an adivasi group in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This allowed for a jovial conversation comparing and contrasting

cultural practices surrounding food and alcohol consumption. The trust he engenders by his identifiable adivasiness renders the formality of hosting officials such as the police commissioner (a Bengali), and myself, less stilted. As the event went on, formalities somewhat subsided. Though dancing initially seemed staged, as more beer was consumed and more official-type guests relaxed or left and people mingled, the event felt less contrived. The dancing was co-ed, again a practice only permissible (by Bengali Muslim sensitivities) in this Mandi-culture-delimited space, with male drummers circulating closely around a group of female singers, a form that would not typically be performed at a fair by a “cultural group.”

At one point, a group of three or four Bengali army youth stopped in. They explicitly requested rice beer, which I found somewhat offensive, but they were gladly served by the hosts. Later, David-da indicated to me that they were sympathetic to the youths’ loneliness living at the camp, and to their interest in Mandi culture, and were more than welcome to participate, even if only to drink, giggle, and run.

Later, the festival would continue at other houses away from the spotlight and officiality of the “Gaira Wangala.” Thus, the Oxfam-sponsored main event, housed in a tent and conducted in an official manner, was carefully controlled by AUG. A less-official celebration would ensue that evening and potentially continue all night at the houses of the villagers, and outsiders and invited guests would be expected to not participate.

Wangala in Chunia

In the village of Chunia, significantly further from the main highway than Gaira, the site of the festival described above, there was a good deal of buzz about the upcoming Wangala. Not all of it was positive, however. Some distinctly feel that such festivals these days are merely an imitation of what they once were, that they don't have the organic feel of a real harvest festival. For some, the problem is religious – most Mandi are Christian, therefore the celebration of Sangsarek ritual is not authentic; this either runs counter to what modern Mandi should be practicing or, more commonly, their heart isn't in it. Easter and Christmas, more formalized and referencing a more “modern” Mandi sensibility, make sense for celebration these days, not some harvest festival barely anyone remembers.¹⁸⁵

The potential rapidity of cultural change is in stark view in Chunia and other villages of Modhupur. Most people can name the small handful of older villagers who consider themselves Sangsarek and are willing to perform Sangsarek rites or traditions in public. While Mandi kobiraj and other healers are still used frequently in the home,

¹⁸⁵ What many accounts miss are the subtleties of these lines of contention, the push and pull of cultural change. Accounts from human rights organizations within Bangladesh sometimes portray missionaries as predators who force conversion to Christianity. Surely the benefits offered by the Church, which came from its distinct economic advantage as an enticement, are somewhat coercive, and the relations between foreign missionaries and their subservient “flock” exploitative. What these accounts drastically underplay, however, are the individual and collective choices involved in conversion.

We can level a typical critique of the power of the Church, but what this partially relies on is a notion of cultural authenticity and subsequent pollution, still remnant in some anthropological accounts (Burling 1997). If we remove the notion that conversion to Christianity necessarily represents a loss of authentic culture for the Mandi, we are left merely with a critique of the power of the Church and how it operates. The ways in which the church has assimilated Mandi cultural practice, however, absent the notion of lost authenticity, actually may represent a very welcome compromise for many Mandis. If Mandis have found commonality, inspiration, or a way out of societal subjugation by the Bengalis, to derogate their choices as misguided and naïve is inappropriate.

particularly by those who cannot afford Western medicine, the public display of Sangsarek ritual is extremely rare.

A further problem is that those who resist conversion are often at risk of being accused of being charlatans, both by the influential church community and by elders who are critical of barriers to modernization. Sangsarek ritual is rarely performed publicly, so what is being practiced is forced and inauthentic, so the logic goes. The charlatan accusation is bolstered by the fact that Sangsarek events, often extremely expensive due to all who have to be fed at a large and therefore successful event, are often sponsored by the church, non-governmental organizations, or even journalists or researchers. Anthony Marak articulates this accusation:

It's like this, if I observe a festival by having assistance, assistance from others' organization and I observe this type of Wangala, I don't like this. If you do it, you have to do it from within your own help and your own efforts. But if it's from NGOs and others, then you are just observing, and drinking wine then creating just a bad situation.

While the Church itself maintains a stellar reputation in the area, NGOs do not, and here is where suspicion is most often leveled. Many disparagingly referred to the Chunia Wangala as “Joynik Nokrek’s Wangala,” as it began and much of it took place at his house, and he was potentially the beneficiary of government and NGO funds. Joynik had procured a basic tent, and an official visitor or two came on the second day, making it semi-official, somewhat like the Gaira festival. It had its more official component during the day, like the Gaira Wangala, and as such was definitely more “official” than the Rongchugala in the same area earlier that year (detailed next), but was not a completely official affair. However, in the past some Rongchugas have also been more official (though Wangala is the most well-known), and these festivals often have such a

hybrid character – both a more official, public component and (before, after, or both before and after) a more private, village affair.

The evening started with a group of men tinkering with drums and bells and slowly drinking some wine. The party then moved to the house of Nebul Daru, daughter of late AUG founder Poresh Mree. It then drifted to a few other houses, before settling at Joynek's for the remainder of the night. We played the gongs and bells along the way when moving, a raucous parade through the night. Early in the night, Joynek performed the same dance Thakur had performed in Gaira at Nebul's with a wooden shield and sword (before retiring early due to his age).



Figure 8 - A Wangala festival in Chunia

The highlight of the dancing was nearer the end of the night when women and men were mingling more freely, a common dance also performed in a much stiffer fashion at the Gaira Wangala and also common at weddings. Women are the primary singers, occupying the center of a circle of men, circulating around with drums, bells, and gongs. What is distinctive is that the women were primarily in control of the liquor at this point, holding the normally male-held pitchers (depicted in the Rongchugala next) and forcing the male drummers to drink. The roots of this dance are in match-making rituals often observed at weddings, potentially a very erotic exercise. In this and many instances in Modhupur, however, a vast number of younger women are now in the cities working in beauty parlors or in garments factories, leaving only young men and older women to participate. However, the songs and symbolism of match-making are still present. Everyone got quite drunk, occasionally taking breaks to huddle and converse around the warmth of a fire of leaves and sticks. It gets quite chilly in winter in the Modhupur forest.

Rongchugala in Joynagacha

The location for the *Rongchugala* festival in the village of Joynagacha was fairly visible from the road (though like Chunia, the road in Joynagacha is quite far from the main highway). This was an area home with a greater than usual collection of *kima*, ancestral posts, many of them decorated for the occasion, signifying a stronger connection to Mandiness than is often found closer to the main highway. Beginning on the 27th of August, the festival continued long into the next day. Cowbells and metal pots were played in unison, though a little off, giving a minor echo effect, while *kram* drums



Figure 9 - Rongchugala festival, including author (photo by Asif)

As is typical at Mandi social occasions, younger men serve drinks from plastic pitchers full of rice beer, which have been scooped from the constantly-stirred large earthen pots that mix stronger *bicchi* liquor with cold water (it would be warm in the winter time) to make the *chu*. Respectful but stand-offish, teenage types lurk in the back and smoke, laughing possibly more at the festival than with it. The handful of older men at the center of activity identify to some degree as “still Sangsarek” in their communities, though not explicitly “non-Christian.” Most have formally converted to Catholicism, but a handful have not.

The party moves from house to house, with a similar celebration at each successive courtyard. Occasionally someone breaks off and goes to their house, or that of a friend or family member, for some rest or some additional food. Some houses serve hefty portions of rice and curry on banana leaves to their guests. At a more well-funded celebration, honored guests would have large hunks of pork fat thrust into their mouths that are politely refused, only leading to the refusing mouth being stuffed with more food. At this festival, there is not quite enough excess for this to be done to any great extent, and the meat presented, if any, is the more modest chicken, not pork.

Occasionally, a friend will attempt to force another friend to drink, which is often a symbol of the bond between inter-married households. The one being forced to drink tries to resist, to a not very high degree of seriousness, ostensibly both because they want to avoid the intoxication and because they don't want to be doted upon. The opposing affects are "Oh, you're too kind, and I just couldn't, and I'll be too drunk" versus "Please, take everything we have, drink, you are a guest and are served by this house."

Often a similar drinking strategy is done en masse for all of the guests. While many, especially the more important guests, are encouraged to sip slowly on a glass of wine, in addition, a pair of younger men will circulate with a pitcher, filling a glass half full to full, and insisting that each successive guest drink it in one fell chug. As this circulates until each successive large jug of rice beer is complete, drunkenness ensues for most of the men. Women tend to drink more subtly and slowly, but some not very sparingly.

A harvest festival like this can continue for days, a parade of drunken revelers arriving at each successive house playing bells and drums, politely demanding beer and food. Between the celebratory moods and the alcohol, the scene is often quite raucous, and at one point a storm drifts in, adding to the intensity of the scene. An older man nursing a soda bottle full of rice beer falls flat on his face, while a dancer loses his *lungie* (sarong) and exposes his boxer shorts, cannot tie it up again, and a friend helps him tie and tuck it. The women howl with laughter.

What I wish to highlight about the second two festivals and, in particular, the final one, is that by being a fundamentally different form of social engagement than the form of sociality publicly permitted in a (Bengali, Muslim) social sphere and state, the events position adivasi practices, Garo (Mandi) in particular, in a space of alterity. In the broad sense, this alterity functions in two ways for the meaning of a Muslim Bengali Bangladesh. That is, it represents at once a threat *to* culture and the threat *of* culture. Put another way, on one hand, the copious consumption of alcohol, particularly in a mixed-gender setting, presents a threat to a respectability conceived of as culturally and religiously Bengali and Muslim. And on the other hand, this type of harvest festival represents a misunderstanding of time-capital and a profligacy that is thoroughly unmodern. Thus, the adivasi here calls into question the limits of cultural acceptance (which we can term multi-culturalism, but which functions in importantly different ways than multi-culturalism in settler states) and also has the potential to shame a modern/modernizing state by attention to its subjects' "backwardness." At the same time,

though, maintaining the distance of alterity allows for resolving those conflicts by placing their burden on the adivasi (or on other “backward” rural subjects); *We*, the respectable/urban/Muslim Bengali do not condone these practices, and the other within is a small minority that is not a threat to the nation. This connects also to the development programs in which adivasis and other “backward” rural subjects must be paternally educated/internally colonized to conform to capitalist lifeways (chapter 4).

Where this fits into the cultural production of IPOs is that, on one hand, the Wangala represents one of the penultimate examples of Garo culture, and so is a key place where IPOs perform their identity maintenance function as well as their representation function. Both the Wangala in Chunia and the Wangala in Gaira had separate parts of the celebration geared toward outsiders (and some notion of respectability) and geared toward insiders. They are also employing the forms available to them, namely, the “*onusthan*,” a very particular and structured form of event in Bangladesh. Thus, wittingly and unwittingly, they reflect and affect what is possible, what is “cultural,” and even what is “Mandi” to their communities and to the larger civil society.

The Rongchugala had no such role of outward presentation, but instead served such functions as camaraderie and celebration, cohesion and cultural continuity. The large Wangala in Dhaka served some of those same functions, while retaining an urban Mandi respectability. Together, they show the diversity of the uses and effects of this event. Oxfam and other international funding mechanisms would probably not willingly sponsor a village’s three-day drinking binge, while a proper “cultural celebration”

involving adivasi girls in colorful costumes is the stuff of brochures and culturally sensitive development dreams.

Some Mandi leaders would suggest that “tradition” or not, this kind of profligacy has no place in contemporary Garo society. Some even imply that this is not the tradition, but a contemporary issue, linked to the leasing of land for cash rather than self-cultivation, which is also in turn linked to the new market for purchased (rather than home-brewed) liquor.

Anthony Marak (introduced earlier), a supporter of IPAC, a political rival of David Simsang, and the newly-elected AUG secretary (just as I was concluding fieldwork in Modhupur), expressed this sentiment to me on several occasions, suggesting that alcohol is a past remnant and a source of weakness. In this view, gone are the days of potential idolatry and luxuriating after the harvest; the modern Mandi must be industrious, and wine is a barrier to that and a causative agent to the loss of ambiguously-tenured land. He leads into this discussion by criticizing the idea of Wangala, and displays its symbolic centrality by an exposition on alcohol, religion, and being a modern worker. (I use the word “wine,” which is the (English) word Anthony used, but what he is referring to is exclusively *chu*, the Mandi fermented beverage made from rice). He takes this argument further, using it as a basis to argue for cultural practice as something that should be whittled down and weeded out for contemporary concerns of progress, and that people should choose one religion (implicitly Christianity) and stick to it. Finally, he tacks back to the argument for “chu as culture,” positing a somewhat nostalgic rendering

of days gone by when this was acceptable, to the present day in which land pressure and political and economic reality render *chu* downright dangerous:

I don't support it, using the wine, no. People who are actually conscious and highly educated, their style of using the wine is good, no? They don't lose their mind or land. In the night they take some, a glass of wine, no? And then go to sleep. And early in the morning they are ready to become busy with their own work. This is good, but if, addictedly, they alone have to take wine, it is very bad. Wangala, this type of ceremony, is encouraging this type of thing, no?

My family, we actually totally avoid the wine, you know this. Wine is a main factor maybe, because there is no limitation to what people are taking and drinking, understand? So it's a bad, well, okay, I support drinking wine but it must be limited. And the time must be, what do you call it, "routine" (English word), right? At evening time after finishing my work. Right? Or a job. But day long, it's killing all your income, and all kinds of important things. If you drink and are addicted, it is very harmful. Maybe someone is very literate or educated, and sometimes they are drinking too.

Traditional culture? Yes, our culture is very good, but which parts are positive, which are negative, we need to identify. Because there are so many cultures now, at present, in a competitive world, that's the economics of it. And religion is a factor also. We should follow one religion. If we follow Christianity, we should follow Christianity. Fifty per cent Sangsarek and fifty per cent Catholic or Christian, I think that it is, well...personally I don't like it. People aren't fixed enough about their beliefs, whether Christian or Sangsarek.

So when they become sick, what do they do? They do *puja* (prayer/offering), no? So if we think and pray to our Lord, and in a scientific way, people won't become sick. If we go to the doctor, then that is well. But if you, if you blindly go, then it would be better if we give a *puja*, right?

Look, actually, in the past, if you were drinking too much, however much it was, it was a personal problem, right? Someone's lifestyle, maybe. It didn't affect his or her family in the past. So when everyone is the same, the land belongs to that race or community, right? And there was no encroachment by Bengali people, understand? So we couldn't lose our land. Because now, at present, it is very bad because lifestyle is changed, right? All are changed. So, now other people, in my very closest family, for example, the Bengalis are always trying to devise how to capture their land. In this situation we should be alert, and we also should competitively work. How to develop our community or our nation? So this is our present situation. But earlier, all were illiterate and the others, the Bengalis, were far away, right? Garo people were curious when they spotted even one Bengali. It was actually like this, right? So at that time, who would purchase the land? Who would capture your land, or who would disturb you? Exploit you? So this situation was not a big problem at that time. Separately or collectively, there were only Garo there. But now, it's not so simple.

Indeed, as Anthony references, there are no longer just Garo. There are Bengali Muslims, some of whom have arguably as large stakes in the fate of the Modhupur forest

area as do Mandis. What should be emphasized, however, is that Mandi-Bengali interactions encompass not only political and economic stakes tied to land and agricultural production, but also stakes of identity and culture. Bengalis too, of course, participate in the making of Mandiness, and sometimes act as consumers of Mandi culture. Not only AUG and Mandi leaders like Anthony, but also the broader NGO world, is engaged in the production of these representations. How those representations are read is not in direct control of the Mandi or the NGOs who wish to present them, but partially in the viewers' interactions with them. This is not to discount, however, the active ways in which Mandi cultural performers are able to deploy their culture. In the next section, I discuss a Mandi cultural performance at a distinctly non-Mandi (Bengali) event, and focus particularly on the perception of the importance of divergent notions of propriety between Bengali Muslims and Mandis. A standard reading posits the Mandi/adivasi female body as an image of exotic and available titillation to the Bengali male, although in this particular context, I also highlight the power wielded by Mandi girls in performance contexts. I note that primarily it is Mandi males who voice anxieties about the predatory gaze of the Bengali Muslim outsider, rather than the women themselves.

The Anti-Corruption Fair

The *town* of Modhupur is a completely separate space from “Modhupur Ghor” or “Modhupur Bon Elaka,” the Modhupur Forest Area, the site of the majority of this dissertation. The town is a near-exclusively Bengali Muslim space. As such, the Anti-

Corruption Fair held there was a Bengali event. The invited performers, however, were near-exclusively Mandi (from forest area villages like Telki and Idilpur, at some distance from Modhupur town). The “cultural programs” at such events make more visible the racial division between Mandi and Bengali in towns, in which everyday interactions and commingling render that division far more muted.

While Mandis and Bengalis, at least in town settings, go about their everyday lives in very similar ways, speaking the same language, dressing similarly, and eating the same foods, events involving Mandi cultural performance mark one and not the other. In fact, terms like *sangskriti* (culture) or *jatigoto* (ethnic) are often only applied to such minority groups, clearly marking the Mandi in contrast to unmarked Bengali culture and, I would add, also implying an element of primitiveness and priority in teleology. The performances primarily involve young girls, and occasionally a young boy, man, or older woman performing Mandi cultural work for money but, more importantly, as part of cultural representation and personal and community enrichment. This event differs from the festivals I will describe next primarily in that, rather than being a mostly-Mandi event, this “town” event is near-exclusively Bengali. The one exception to this is a stall of the Church of Bangladesh, which includes Mandi cultural artifacts and a number of cultural paintings by my friend Chondon Mangshan, a prominent Mandi artist in the Modhupur Forest Area.

The vividness of this sort of cultural program in Bangladesh rests on racial difference. While it is somewhat acceptable for Bengali girls and women to perform *Rabindro songit* (the songs of Rabindranath Tagore) and other “Bengali folk music”

singing on the harmonium with tabla accompaniment, there is little scope for any other kind of female performance outside of “high art” venues like the Shilpokala Academy in Dhaka. Even the Baul folk form is now performed almost exclusively by men. There are rare exceptions to this remnant in Hindu religious performance in village areas of high Hindu concentration, and also traveling strip shows performed in secretive, shady, smoky venues and grouped conceptually with the perceived salaciousness of Bollywood.

What *is* permissible is allowed through the lens of radical racial, ethnic, and religious otherness ascribed to the figure of the tribal. As such, where geographically feasible, an “*onusthan*” (a program or formal celebration) will often feature one or more “tribal groups” of young othered females. Sexualization of their bodies, whether adjacent to or directly intertwined with their racialization, is restrained but obvious. Unlike within the boundaries of a smoky, shady strip venue where cat-calling, screaming, and grasping at performers is permissible (the aforementioned traveling strip shows), what is permissible here is public, uninterrupted staring at young women’s bodies. We might consider that the onus of restraint in the cultural-religious division of the sexes is generally placed on the female, so this is not necessarily a transgression for men. The transgression, in any case, can be justified by the intense othering of these young women. What is a somewhat more recent development is the ubiquity of the “snap” – photo and video recording via sophisticated yet inexpensive mobile phone technology.¹⁸⁷ A few women were present at this event, but the crowd was overwhelmingly male.

¹⁸⁷ As a side note, even inexpensive camera are a relative fortune in Bangladesh, as cameras are taxed upwards of 100% as luxury items for import, while mobile phones with *built-in* cameras are not, and have provided digital reproduction to the masses in Bangladesh.

When we came through the town on motorcycles, the young girls were immediately a subject of rapt attention from the vast majority of younger men we passed. By virtue of their racial otherness and their non-wearing of the modest *shalwar kameez*, these girls, quite young, were automatically seen as sexual objects.

The group I was accompanying to the event was organized and taught by Nebul Daru. Nebul is a teacher with a lot of status as well as a personal reputation for kindness and generosity in the Modhupur area. Her father was Poresh Chondro Mree, the founder of AUG, the uncle of long-time leader Partha Mrong, and himself a well-respected leader of the early opposition to Mandi displacement in the Modhupur area, known to many and to Sheikh Mujib himself as the “king of the Garo” in Bangladesh. As such, Nebul stands as part of the class that is able, through NGO channels, to represent Garo culture, although in this uncommon case, outside of the Church. The Church of Bangladesh, as well as the Catholic Church, may be the most visible in this respect, partly because of the sums of money they are able to command as well as their national and international networks. Along with the Churches are well-financed NGOs like IPDS of Sanjip Drong and internationally connected human rights NGOs like MEG. Academics interact with these organizations that, along with University Press Limited, are some of the few outfits publishing academic work on adivasi communities.

Non-governmental organizations are the most visibly involved in the production of Mandiness. While the majority of the NGOs at this particular fair are not directly involved, it is the NGO world that often fosters this type of cultural performance, whether directly or indirectly. Here, in the courtyard of a school, the *Upojela Parishad Mikrapur*,

sits the stage and a whole slew of booths of different NGOs. The event is sponsored by Transparency International and is, as such, an “anti-corruption fair.” The slogan “It is our strength-we will know and make known-to stave off corruption” is constantly repeated on the microphone. At the back of the courtyard, a snack and tea stall serves tea and *shingara* (chickpea-and-spice-filled fried pastry) and overlooks the serene rice paddies below. The stage is decorated in red and green, flanked by large Peavey loudspeakers and with a chair and podium in the middle. Atop a table sits a harmonium and tabla, resting on a white cloth. As the “cultural program,” the finale of the festival, is announced, Mandi folk music starts to play through the speakers. A group of older Mandi teenage girls, whose red outfits have become synonymous with Mandi dance in popular representation, are collecting at the back of the crowd. As the girls prepare to go on the stage, 30 or so young men mill about in the backstage area, pretending to look at the NGO booths beside the stage, trying for a closer look while giggling and daring their friends to go closer.

Nebul’s group is first, the younger of the two dance groups to perform. Nebul announces the song through the microphone, and a tabla player comes out to accompany a young girl in her group on the harmonium. She wears an orange wrap. Colored lights whirl as she sings a Mandi folk song, beautifully and confidently despite her age. From here on, a professional photographer circles the stage, getting intensely close to the performers to get his shots. A few people applaud at the end. Next, a little boy comes out and does a version of the war dance with a shield and sword to recorded, distorted music. He garners zero applause.

Next comes the main event, the group from the Church of Bangladesh in Idilpur. Their costumes are elaborate and they are coordinated. A large woman from the Church announces their arrival. They giggle and prepare to start, but the music is delayed by technical difficulty.

Instead, one of Nebul's little girls takes the stage in yellow outfit and short hair and does her dance. I count at least 20 mobile phone cameras videoing her dance. The 10-year-old girl and the teenage girls alternate dances, and applause comes with some encouragement from the announcer at the podium. Several hundred men and twice as many eyes are locked on their bodies, with a good third aiming camera phones. This lasts for 20 minutes or so until there is some difficulty with the generator keeping the amplification system and lights going. Nebul, their caretaker, teacher, and choreographer, ignore the attention. She is proud and encouraging of her girls.

This event is a relatively contained space in which to perform. Mandis enter as performers, and are accorded some degree of respect and protection by being there for that purpose. While on one hand, it is difficult not to see the potential vulnerability of these young girls performing in an overwhelmingly male setting, it is also a setting in which they wield some amount of power and respect as performers. That is, by venturing into a somewhat strange environment, coming from the village to the town, having Nebul as their only caretaker, and entering into a space that is clearly performed as male-dominated, they are taking a risk. Also, the fact of their racial/cultural alterity is an important component of what makes their performance work in terms of Bengali Muslim

societal acceptance of women dancing in public. However, this does not render them mere passive victims of a power-laden male gaze. In contrast, the performance was never described to me in those terms by Nebul or the girls themselves; rather, Nebul and her girls' pride in their performance is what was most salient from their point of view.

The specter of invasion of Mandi spaces by voyeuristic tourism presents a rather different prospect than Mandis coming into a public cultural performance on their own terms. It is primarily Mandi men, in fact, who express anxiety about protection of “our women” in their village spaces. The specter of what men voice as most threatening about tourism is the seemingly archetypal figure of the threatening Muslim male other among Mandi Christians. Such anxieties gain historical legitimacy through the Liberation War and adivasi resistance to state incursion in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), where fellow adivasi women have been brutalized by Pakistan's and Bangladesh's soldiers. And they gain traction in contemporary analyses of the CHT as well: the perception is that tourism (often by Bangladesh's soldiers) in the CHT has brought with it prostitution of adivasi women.



Figure 10 - 2011 Agricultural Fair in Modhupur – arrival of the VIPs, with Mandi girls leading the procession

What I have discussed above in terms of performance at different levels will now be read through Raymond Williams’ “selective tradition” (1978). Williams’ work provides a framework for incorporating how institutions at different levels, such as IPOs like AUG, and even discourses and aesthetics linked to global indigeneity shape Mandi cultural practices, while Mandi are constantly re-shaping emergent cultural practice.

Selecting Tradition

In debates about what constitutes authentic or useful tradition among the Mandi of Modhupur, there is a constant negotiation. These negotiations take place among Indigenous Peoples' Organizations like AUG, Wangala festival organizers and participants, and even the broader governmental (NGO and government) forces in Bangladesh. The negotiation, further, takes place between Mandi leaders and everyday Mandi, and between Mandi and Bengali hegemonic renderings of what constitutes acceptable tradition. These plays between active on- the-ground negotiations and both broad and everyday cultural forces at work are effectively theorized by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (1978).

The problem with the common concept of tradition, Williams argues, is its lack of inertia. Rather, tradition is “an actively shaping force” that could be more accurately described as a process of “*selective tradition*: an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification” (1978: 115). Williams goes on to clarify that “no mere training or pressure is truly hegemonic,” but that true hegemony is that which is actually internalized and even often contradictory. Moreover, the institutions and processes that maintain this hegemony are “self-generating” (118). While both of these arguments, for the internalization of hegemony and domination through selectivity in the constitution of tradition, offer important reformulations of Marxist concepts, the space for agency becomes unclear. It seems the model is one of unconscious negotiation between dominant and subordinate interests, yet Williams is

asserting that there is always a conscious selection of what becomes tradition by the dominant class. This seems contradictory, however, Williams goes on to elaborate upon the types of tradition that constitutes these hegemonic negotiations.

Again stressing the non-static nature of his model, Williams notes that “the complexity of a culture is to be found ... in the dynamic interrelations ... of historically varied and variable elements” (121). He draws attention to processes outside of the “selected and abstracted dominant system” (121) to incorporate what he terms the “residual” and “emergent” elements of tradition. Residues are non-deliberate (as opposed to “archaic,” deliberate) cultural elements from the past that remain as still effective elements of the present (122). Emergent elements, in contrast, are new cultural formations that are constantly being created. Through his description of the emergent, Williams is elaborating on the specific ways in which agency may be incorporated into his model. Through the emergent and the residual he outlines the ways in which dominant culture incorporates and selects tradition, thus clarifying the actual ways in which hegemony is negotiated. He thus articulates how, by way of pressures and limits, emergent cultural elements provide resistance, and how, in opposition, residue is appropriated, emergence is accommodated, and domination is asserted through selection of tradition.

In transitioning from his descriptions of Cultural Theory and into Literary Theory, Williams makes another accommodation, further into the realm of practice and embodied experience, a humanism to accommodate criticisms of the structural nature of his sociological analyses. “Structures of feeling,” or alternately, “structures of experience,”

are what Williams calls the less describable, actually lived and practiced elements of social relationships. He speaks of the “style” of different moments of history. Branding the structural forms of “ideology” and “culture” as always something past, Williams seeks to incorporate the present in what he calls “changes of presence,” which “exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action” well before any kind of formal institutionalization (132). Again, Williams is incorporating into his model a way of viewing the humanness of lived sociality and a viable concept of agency in order to make sense of actually embodied human experience. While somewhat lacking in formal definition, these concepts of presence and feeling do pose as problems some of the nuances in culture and again, emphasize active process and negotiation rather than rigid structuralism as their models.

The import of Williams’ model to the Wangala and broader Mandi debates and negotiations about “tradition” should by now be obvious. Rather than merely accepting institutional definitions of what constitutes authentic Mandi culture, Mandi are constantly defining and re-defining what constitutes tradition. At the same time, these definitions, far from being divorced from the training and institutional contexts in which they may become enshrined (via Mandi IPOs, global indigeneity discourses, and broader societal prohibitions of what is culturally acceptable), are in constant dialogue with them. It is in this constant dialogue and reformulation of tradition that I read Mandi representation and performance practices, rather than in broad strokes as a necessarily politically disempowering folklorization or, alternately, disempowering global indigeneity.

In this chapter, I have detailed how Mandi “culture” happens. Primarily through public festivals like the Wangala, I show some of the ways in which imagery of Mandiness circulates. What past scholarship has been written on the Mandi has tended to focus on kinship systems (Burling 1997), mortuary rituals (de Maaker 2006), and other cultural features. Ellen Bal’s “They Ask Us if We Eat Frogs” is somewhat of an exception, and seeks to understand Mandi and Mandiness as a contemporary social construction, using an “ethnogenesis” model as a template. Ethnogenesis is described by Willem van Schendel in the case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as characteristic of “*jumma*” (swidden agriculture), and describes the process of identity construction as the product of contemporary politico-cultural innovation. Drawing on his rendering, Bal sees such ethnogenesis in the case of the Mandi, an identity construction around which Bangladesh’s “Mandi” have been able to coalesce due to linguistic and cultural similarity, Christianity, and state pressure (2000), as well as invented tradition (Bal 2010).

Where I have sought to expand upon Bal’s ideas in this chapter in particular is by looking at debates about representation and culture among Mandis in Modhupur, particularly in relation to Bengali Muslims and an international NGOscape. In exploring representation, it should be emphasized that Mandi representation is far from a one-way street. Rather, representations are influenced by and influence outside representation, and Mandis are often representing themselves for a variety of reasons, characteristic of Williams’ “selective tradition” (1978).

I have used the Wangala, a harvest festival currently celebrated by many Mandi, as a central inroad into Mandi representation because Wangala festivals and other festivals like them are some of the most visible scenes of Mandi culture, both for outsiders and for Mandi themselves. While “doing puja” and accessing forms of spiritual healing are relatively private practices of Mandiness (in contrast to the rather public religion of the Christian churches), festivals are an out-in-the-open, visible, and therefore often debated form of cultural expression. Not only Mandi themselves, but churches and priests, NGO donors and workers, and even the government and Forest Department have some investment in the Wangala, how and where it is performed, and its import and meaning.

I have analyzed several different but related sites of Mandi cultural performance, and wrestled with the tendency to view them on a spectrum of authenticity. However, authenticity is often the line on which these festivals are assessed by educated Mandi themselves. Authenticity rests on a number of features: who is paying for the festival, to what extent does it resemble a sanitized pan-Bangladesh “conference” form with official guests and formal speeches, and other more subjective assessments such as “where the heart is” for its participants. Implicit and sometimes explicit in the latter is the tension between Christianity and Mandi Sangsarek practices: to what degree has Church appropriation of Mandi cultural practice either eroded or encouraged the latter? Finally, there is the issue of the centrality of chu (rice beer) to Mandi festivals, which is also in tension with the Church and, perhaps more prominently, in tension with the modernization sentiments of many Mandi leaders. Put simply, Mandi leaders often frame

chu in terms of a debate about how to properly socially develop, seeing chu as a barrier to modern economic productivity. Frequently, accusations are leveled in the psychological framework of addiction, which is seen as deleterious to the society and counter to Mandi self-development and societal protection goals.

Ethnographer Mahmudul Sumon, doing research among Mandi youth in Dhaka around the same time as my own work, notes that the construction of authenticity here rests on a reconnection with culturally knowledgeable elders (2012). A key elder identified to Sumon was Joynek Nokrek, the host of the “semi-official” Wangala in Chunia village I have described above:

Organizing wanna for a group of activists I knew during this research has meant going back to the villages and seeking knowledge from older people who practiced shongsharek ways of life. Activist students would often find it difficult to describe the details of the ritualistic procedures of wanna performed in a shongsharek 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 wanna 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 Joinik Acchu (acchu is the Mandi word for grandfather). Joinik Nokrek’s participation in the festival has been seen by some of the activists as “genuine” efforts when it comes to performing the puja for wanna. Wangala 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 looked at those efforts as not authentic and driven by business objectives (organizing wanna can involve fund collection from the high ups or powerful in the government, told one participant). 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. Wanna 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 wanna. (Sumon 2012)

Aside from these questions of authenticity related to the specter of outside support, however, many Mandi, particularly Mandi youth, are able to access a pleasurable feeling of alterity and belonging, of adivasiness and Mandiness, of specialness through cultural practice. I share an ethnographic portrait/vignette as a window into the interaction between the challenges of “feeling Mandi” and cultural festivals, often read as the culture of “the village” as opposed to the town or city. Referenced above by Sumon, the village versus town/city, rural versus urban, is another key axis for authenticity claims. But more than a mere subject for debate, *gram-sohor* (village-city) is an embodied experience of Mandiness/non-Mandiness, lived and felt in the context of Mandi labor migration. I offer a personal ethnographic vignette as a window into simultaneous feelings of alterity and belonging:

“My first word was *am*, mango. I wouldn’t say anything else. Ma would hit me so hard and try to get me to say other words, and I couldn’t. Finally they got me a hearing aid and I started to learn Bengali. Mandi is too hard, though.”

Mishti has faced a number of challenges growing up, and has adopted an affect of often being exasperated, with others, with herself, and with circumstances. Her exasperation today is accentuated by feeling out of place in *the village*. *The village* seems hard and difficult to her, and her family in the village difficult to understand. She is drawn to my friend Chondon and me, I the English-speaking outsider anthropologist and he, the calm and warm artist, both of us patient enough to sit and hear her out while Chondon paints decorations on the wedding stage and veranda.

Mishti’s frustration with language stems partially from this hearing difficulty. With severe hearing impairment in both ears, Mishti recalls her difficulties with speech from a young age. To this day, Mishti speaks relatively little Mandi. To her, the sounds, tones, and melodies of the Mandi language remain elusive, which she partially attributes to her hearing. While Mishti does use a hearing aid (in one ear – she insisted her parents not spend the money on a second one when she can get by with just one), she still relies heavily on lip-reading to understand people. She finds this far easier in consonant Bengali and English than in tonal and vowel-nuanced Mandi. In her mother’s ancestral village, where, especially at a Mandi social occasion like today’s wedding, most are emphasizing their Mandiness by speaking more Mandi than usual, Mishti can’t communicate very well. And Mishti actually loves to talk.

In fact, in class 10 now, Mishti speaks English with near fluency. She is fascinated with English and American books and movies, and her current favorite is the Harry Potter series and the young British actress Emma Watson who plays the role of Hermione in the films. Along with films and books, Mishti’s English skills have been fostered by the school she is able to attend and her parents’ connection with American ex-patriot circles in Dhaka. Right now, she is very much missing her mother’s comfort. Her father will attend the wedding, and has told her that her mother cannot attend

due to work. But Mishti suspects he is just not bringing her because he wants to feel young again, riding free on his motorbike to the village and hanging out with friends.

Mishti has lived her whole life in Dhaka, in *the city*. Her mother is a domestic worker in a Bengali-American household, while her father works as a driver for the American embassy. Drawn to this American world, and also identifying strongly as a Bangladeshi and a Dhakaite, an urbanite, Mishti nonetheless feels the marginalization of racial othering from Bengali classmates and acquaintances. She has developed a few close male friends, while generally considering girls her age catty and cruel. She tends to get along better with adults than with these mean teenagers.

“People always say to me, why don’t you speak Mandi? You are Mandi. They think you must be from China or Japan. And I speak through my nose so that’s another reason they think I’m from China. They can’t understand me and they make fun of me. They’re so mean!”

Hours later, after the formalities of the groom’s arrival and dinner, then a talent show, the crowd starts to subside and raucous friends of the groom start a late-night party of singing, dancing, and drinking, of which Chondon and I are the eldest members. Chondon slouches into a chair, holding a microphone close to his mouth as he sings in Mandi, while a circle of young men and women dance around an inner circle of drummers and gong players.

Late at night and well into the next morning, I’m relieved to see Mishti relaxing, able to feel a part of activities that are not centered on social conventions and linguistic dexterity required to perform as a Mandi at an important social event, but rather reference a celebratory, if recent, Mandi tradition. I, as an outsider and ethnographer, also feel relieved at the relaxation of cultural and linguistic conventions that remain elusive, especially as I myself share a degree of hearing impairment that makes a multi-lingual and noisy social occasion particularly difficult. Instead, after the evening’s social challenges, she (and I) feel a part of that *village Mandiness* that she simultaneously felt rejected by and was rejecting. She can feel the regular pulsing of a drumbeat, has the comforts of a close friend from Dhaka who just finally arrived, and she sings along, smiling and dancing in and out of the circle of Mandi youth.

Festivals and events contain sometimes shared and other times contrasting meanings to different Mandis. For Mishti, the pre-nuptial dancing event meant anxiety about being part of what *she understands* as her ethnicity’s culture and ways, and came to mean some measure of relief and acceptance.

Another thread I have followed that underlies some of these forms of representation concerns how Mandi and adivasi sexuality are read by outsiders and defended by insiders. That is, in a context in which the adivasi female has long been read as sexualized and somewhat licentious to Bengalis (and also to Western colonizers and tourists [van Schendel 2001]), how are Mandi women able to represent themselves without being read in this way? Another blunt question is, to what extent does this

sexualization feel threatening to Mandi women themselves? Indeed, it seems to matter most to male Mandi leaders invoking “protection of our women” as a common and charged explanation for cultural and societal protectionism against an outside threat, particularly from a charged image of a predatory Muslim male.

As a final analysis in this chapter, I incorporate scholarship about authenticity in nationalism and group identities. As the dissertation proceeds, I will contest arguments by both scholars and adivasi leaders who insist on a radical politics deriving from the history of adivasi positioning in South Asia that may not reflect contemporary shifts in power through NGOs. In a similar vein, I contest readings of nationalistic identity politics (whether Bengali, jumma, or Mandi) as always necessarily violent and destructive in their essentialisms. The impulse my two critiques share (caution against outside insistence on a radical politics and insistence on deconstructing essentialized nationalisms) is to engage ethnographically with the complexities of Mandi debates, both internal and external.

Contemporary identity formations such as indigeneity and indeed folkloric renderings of adivasis in South Asia derive a good portion of their weight from the history of cultural scholarship, museum representations, and post-colonial nationalisms. Before reaching my conclusion, I engage with Regina Bendix’s scholarship on the relationship between “authenticity” and identity politics, and contest her reading of such essentialisms as necessarily destructive.

Authenticity Up for Debate

Cultural scholarship evolved alongside and intertwined with nationalism, and folklore studies contributed enormously to the politics of nationhood through its particular discourses of authenticity. We still harvest the fruits of this combination: wars carried out in the name of national and ethnic difference, and devastating campaigns of ethnic cleansing. ...[P]olitical parties and electoral campaigns in various regions of the world endorsed a politics or platform of authenticity, which to anyone having lived through the twentieth century should signal the frightening potential of essentialist dogma into which even the most ardent rhetoric of liberation can become transformed. (Bendix 1997: 227)

Numerous post-colonial critics have made the argument that many of the problems posed by the related notions of “identity politics,” “ethnic politics,” “religious politics,” and “communalism” are particular to post-colonial states. The explanation given for this is often that, in contrast to the “West,” in the case of post-colonial states there were no pre-existing conditions, no deeper and historically cemented bases on which to build a nation-state (Mohsin 2000: 59). More nuanced accounts include the argument that the *idea* of the nation-state gradually evolved in and of the West and therefore is inapplicable elsewhere, and the argument that the incredible transformations of state hegemony that took place in the West have not been able to be implemented in societies elsewhere (Chatterjee 1993). These authors do well to point to some of the socio-cultural disjunctures created during the processes of imperialism and its associated colonial governmentality.

However, two challenges to this argument, both of which can be teased out of Benedict Anderson’s well-known treatise on the nation-state (1983), are that, one, many of the ideas of nationalism as we now think of them were initiated in conjunction with Latin American movements (which is alternately part and not part of the West, but were of the colony and not of the colonizer) and two, that every nation-state, Western or not,

post-colonial or not, has undergone the process of constructing such imagined communities from diverse populations. Further, Anderson points to nationalism's flexibility in its implementation. Thus, that nationalism has failed in the "non-West" due to its heterogeneity in contrast with the West seems reductionist, while long-term success of *hegemonic* formulations in the West seems a slightly more convincing take on Western nationalism.

Posing a somewhat "Occidental" construction of a homogenous West and a heterogeneous non-West denies the diversity of the West. Perhaps more problematically, while highlighting some of the problems of colonialism, such a view of nationalism's "failure" in post-colonies does little to emphasize the real and everyday forms of devastation and disruption perpetrated both then and now in the global imperialist atmosphere that, beyond the problematic nation-state model, have presented economic and social impediments to post-colonial subjects in their struggles for a viable position on the global stage.

Related to this problem are the valuable and rigorous scholarship and theoretical contributions to understanding the contingency of cultural constructs, the imagination and invention of unities wrought through some notion of realness or authenticity. These writings do well to point out that any authenticity claim may be contested, and to recognize the danger of applications of constructs of truth and falsity claims in the arena of culture. This is an intimate piece of the problem of states, post-colonial and not, that need to articulate a national identity: "A very thin line separates the desire for individual authenticity and the calling to convince others of the correctness of a particular rendering

or localization of the authentic. The most powerful and lasting example of this double legacy in folklore's disciplinary history is the (ethno-) nationalist project" (Bendix 1997: 20). Ethno-nationalism typically carries a very charged status, and it is certainly in the interest of highlighting its and related constructions' dangers that Bendix and others have critiqued the notion of authenticity, both within the disciplines of folklore and anthropology and without.

Yet, I would challenge, we must be cautious about the politics and power involved in such a claim. If Bendix seeks to problematize authenticity as an operation of power (which it surely is), she must also recognize authenticity as a potentially counter-hegemonic operation. If the types of movements mentioned above, like "identity politics" and "ethnic politics," are such pervasive problems of states as well as prevalent at both local and transnational scales, what becomes of their deconstruction in the name of highlighting their contingent nature? Taken to another level, isn't there a circular argument positing that if claims to authenticity are themselves always problematic, what *becomes* "truth" is the deconstruction of authenticity, and is the scholar not once again the arbiter of some kind of superior standpoint? As such, the problematizing of authenticity itself poses its own authenticity.

I agree with Bendix that, "Removing authenticity and its allied vocabulary is one useful step toward conceptualizing the study of culture in the age of transculturation" (9). Yet if the paradigm of authenticity is here to stay, and a key subject for debate for the Mandi, what are the ramifications of such a standpoint for people like the Mandi who have strategically and successfully tapped into the resources of "authenticity" to mobilize

claims against more powerful hegemonies for measures of real gains against structural disenfranchisement, oppression, and poverty? Further, Bendix's account fails to adequately recognize the extent to which identity formations in the post-colony are far from hegemonically constituted: rather, the authenticity of such formations are a subject of constant negotiation and debate. To the extent that folklorists and anthropologists, more often than not, work with marginalized peoples and discourses, this is far from a moot point. Further, celebration of the "transcultural" may prove to diffuse inter-ethnic conflict in some contexts, but in many others, such visions of globalization have proven to be false hopes. Authenticity is one of the central ways in which Mandi debate appropriate culture. In Mandi discussions surrounding inclusion and exclusion, and visions of different Mandi futures, the extent to which Mandi rely on a notion of folklorized Mandi culture is often up for grabs.

On one hand are scholars like Bendix who argue that authenticity in identity politics is rife with potential for violence, while on the other hand are those like Prathama Banerjee who argue that folklorization detracts from political force and possibility, sanitizing and defanging potentially radical formulations and deployments of "indigenous" or "adivasi." My goal has been to problematize both of these readings as inadequately attending to the fluidity and contestability of such identity claims as the Mandis'.

The latter point is outlined in its theoretical form by Banerjee, and by local Mandi leader Anthony Marak, both recounted in the beginning of this chapter. What I have argued is under-emphasized in these historical and theoretical readings is that cultural

forms and celebrations may offer other possibilities and formulations that may not fit into the anti-state, anti-capitalist, or anti-neoliberal readings either scholars or Mandi leaders may want them to; while at the same time, neither should the politics they do offer be read as necessarily containing a hegemonic violence.

Conclusion: Changes in Leadership

I read recent changes in leadership – the election of Raju Sangma and Anthony Marak, for example – as a move away from an older politics of indigeneity and struggle and toward a Mandi-ness more embracing of “the modern.” As Mandis are becoming educated and participating more in the private and public sectors, oppositional politics are fading away. We can call this the mainstreaming of the Mandis. At the village level, there is still deep distrust of the Bengali majority. But through the international Christian connections and all the implications and results thereof, young Mandi leaders are optimistic about the future of Mandis.

Even in urban areas, an older oppositional, protectionist view of “our women” working in garment and beauty parlors is giving way to an embrace of the strength of the new, modern Mandi woman.¹⁸⁸ At the same time, there is still pushback. Fear of cultural assimilation and loss of language, as well as intense male fear of Mandi women intermarrying with Bengali men is present.

We can lament the co-opting of culture that accompanies such forces as missionaryism and the discourse of indigeneity, or we can read the Mandi, primarily

¹⁸⁸ Elaborated upon extensively by beauty parlor workers I interviewed, as well as members of Indigenous Peoples’ Development Services and Nokmandi Community Center, both sources of Mandi advocacy in Dhaka.

positive interpretation thereof. Ideally, for the Mandi, they are able to maintain some semblance of unique identity, while mainstreaming into Bengali society, and this is often accomplished by circumventing Bengali channels of patronage. This is exactly what the Church allows Mandis to do, as well as the international NGO sector, particularly in English-speaking channels. Bengali old boy networks are vociferously protected by cronyism, whereas Western cultural beliefs about democratization involve exactly the kinds of people international organizations are looking for. As such, international institutions and Mandis shape each other into bypassing those networks.

Mandi cultural production occurs at a variety of levels, and those levels, while permeable and always influencing each other, often correspond to varying levels of intimacy and perceived authenticity. But outside of the discourse of authenticity, each festival offers something different in function despite their surface similarities. At the Dhaka level, we see a celebration of Mandi-ness that is internal and allows for group cohesion in a Dhaka that can feel at once full of opportunity and full of racial-ethnic barriers. At the town level, we see a representation that fills a niche of colorful “culture” and sexualized bodies in an otherwise religiously restricted space. At the village formal level, we see leaders representing Mandi culture to Bengali community leaders, encouraging cooperation and giving themselves uniqueness and legitimacy. And at the village “traditional” level we see the enactment of cultural practices without an outside audience, a participatory celebration of harvest, bounty, and “tradition.”

Yet at each level, the authenticity of cultural production is brought into question by some and less important to others. Questions arise: who speaks for Mandi culture? Is it

the Church? The Indigenous Peoples' Organizations? One thing is for sure: it is not and never will be "the mussolman," as we will see in chapters 4 and 6.

In this chapter, I have introduced a locally-based IPO, and detailed the ways the organization serves the community, primarily as a de facto leadership for the sizable number of Mandi living in the Modhupur area and as producing and reproducing a particular brand of representation to the outside community. This involves a familiar (due to its connections to transnational indigeneity) depoliticized indigeneity that serves multiple ends: opportunity for celebration of "Mandi culture," music, ritual, and dance; ritual and forms that are on one hand palatable to a Bengali and an international audience and on the other sensualized, exotic, and intriguing; and the reinforcement of a teleological understanding of indigeneity that retains those "past" (cultural) elements while offering a potential mainstreamed, modern future.

I have outlined a number of different venues where representation of Mandi culture is taking place, reading them for their varying audiences and functions. I have compared several different Wangala events, a central part of IPOs' involvement in the cultural production of "Mandi-ness," and argued that they are central to debates about what it means to be modern as well as the limits of acceptance of alterity. And finally, I have detailed an example of how indigeneity can circumvent if not supersede governmental practices.

In the next chapter, I expand on the perceptions of adivasis as counter-productive economic actors, and detail alternative income generation programs, which are at the forefront of injecting capitalist entrepreneurship into Mandi life. Taking off from

Anthony's comments about being strong and industrious, and avoiding unmodern things like Wangala and excessive drinking, the perception of an improper Mandi work ethic runs through these alternative income programs. Wangala and Anthony's comments are directly related to the ideas of money – that money is an abstraction and one that must be learned in order to re-educate primitive forms of life away from their ingrained profligacy.

For Anthony, a central character of this chapter, Mandi youth are at the cusp of this debate over Mandi futures, over a more culturalized Mandi identity responding to adversity with alterity, and a more “modern,” liberal, and pragmatic Mandi identity responding to adversity with deferral and development. For him, there is a close connection between “modernity,” education, and Mandi societal advancement; and also little distinction between “tradition” and profligacy:

Wangala when it is just watching and drinking...the new generation already, I think, suffer, they are suffering, and also addicted, no? Addicted, in teenager age. If you are practicing with the wine, taking the wine, then in the future what will be?

Chapter 4 – Generating Income Generators – The Alternatives

[We] prescribe a re-focusing of conservation efforts on variables that have been identified as being important in international development studies-human rights, community capacities, ability to govern, and sources of revenue. In conservation schemes it is essential, in other words, to ensure the healthy development of human communities in order to develop healthy resources.” – p. 3, Cunningham et al, Introduction: Tailoring Collaborative Research in Bangladesh

Taken from a report prepared by the East-West Center for the USAID-funded Integrated Protected Area Co-Management (IPAC) organization, this quote seems normal and commonsensical. It uses a development rhetoric that is scientific-sounding, yet general and vague, with phrases like “community capacities” and “healthy resources.” On another level, it is somewhat disturbing in its implied quantification and objectification of entire lifeworlds and ways of being. First is the listing of “variables” like “human rights” alongside “sources of revenue” and “community capacities” that assign value in legalistic and economic terms and only value what has been “identified as being important” by approved studies. Second is the inversion of priority in the conservation scheme, from being about preserving resources for human beings to being about “healthy development of human communities *in order to* develop healthy resources.” And bringing these two problems together with a third, what group of people might be identified by the moniker “human communities” and talked about as one of many tick-boxes on a chart of viability? While such terms certainly spring from a history of sociologization, the ways they are applied in development-speak reflect a condescending attitude toward those to whom

they refer. This is not about keeping the local neighborhood association in an American suburb running smoothly so that their library resources are maintained, nor a middle-class section of Dhaka supplied with purified water so that they stay healthy enough to water their gardens, but rather about management. These “human communities” must be reckoned with in order to implement the pre-defined goals of conservation, a nobler and grander, perhaps the noblest and grandest of enterprises (Argyrou 2005), and far beyond the local concerns of either individual people or communities operating in spaces defined for conservation. This talk fits well with Foucault’s management and security paradigms of governance (Foucault 2007 [1978]).

Human beings, then, become an element to be managed in the goal of security in the form of conservation. The means of recuperating legitimacy for these development paradigms is “localization” of solutions, with *people* reincorporated in the roles of stakeholders, re-granted an active role:

Given the social nature of protected areas it is not surprising that they are often the source of conflict. Individuals and communities located in or near protected areas often depend on local resources for their livelihoods. Thus, though conflicts vary greatly in quality, they usually occur when *the needs of individuals and communities living in or near protected areas do not correlate with the needs of conservation* as defined by management entities. An increasingly prevalent answer to protected area related conflicts is governmental decentralization and the creation of community-based conservation (CBC) programs with the goal of involving local community members as active stakeholders in conservation.” – Rural livelihoods, p. 2

Although the inversion is merely one of order, again the needs of the community may not appropriately correlate to the “needs” of conservation, rather than the other way around, and these two are rendered equivalent. With these broadly defined problems outlined, that of the human community in conflict with conservation goals, what then become the

solutions, the practical approaches to bringing “human communities” in line with said goals? For the Modhupur area the axioms of this reconciliation are:

- 1) *Alternative income generating activities*, such as cultivation of bamboo and cane, handicraft making, medicinal plant nurseries, poultry, bee cultures, and cattle rearing can help improve the livelihoods of local people.
- 2) In Madhupur National Park there is a serious fuelwood crisis. Fuelwood efficient stoves should be promoted to reduce dependence on forest.
- 3) Homestead plantation activities should be promoted to reduce dependence on national park forests.
- 4) *A habitat restoration and forest rehabilitation program* employing local people should be implemented to restore degraded areas in the park.
- 5) *Ecotourism* should be introduced by developing publicity activities (colorful posters, booklets, and postcards), eco-cottages and other tourist facilities, guide vehicles, and certified eco-guides. In this way eco-tourism could potentially become another income-generating activity for local people. However, much care must be taken with eco-tourism to ensure that local people and ethnic minorities, rather than more wealthy and connected outsiders, are the beneficiaries. (Begum 169)

It is indeed in this pursuit of re-orienting power structures so that “the people” (local communities and ethnic minorities) reap the rewards of conservation efforts, that local functionaries of IPAC often become frustrated, as I will detail in this chapter. I highlight points one, four, and five, as they are the programs on which I will focus in this chapter, and the most controversial. Two and three, homestead plantations and different stoves, are less controversial, and have been active for some time.

Are these measures “working” in Modhupur? That is, are they successful according to the development agenda’s stated conservation goals? Apparently it is too early to tell. These programs’ efficacy cannot be judged until they have been allowed to be fully implemented for some time, I’m told. As IPAC chief of forest Reed Merrill describes, unfortunately, “We’ve encountered a lot of resistance to the project in the Modhupur area.” However, IPAC is confident that if only local leaders stop resisting, and if “co-management” can be implemented on a large enough scale, it will certainly work.

However, an evaluation of similar, long-running AIG (Alternative Income Generation) and other similar programs in and around Teknaf Game Reserve near Cox's Bazaar yielded the evaluation: "Currently, AIGs are playing a limited and inconsistent role in reducing forest dependence among key local stakeholders." Apparently, it has proven to be more difficult than expected to implement a whole alternative local economy, to sustain it into self-sufficiency, and to coordinate and monitor it all. If we take seriously Foucault's rendering of modern governance's goal of building on natural givens (Foucault 2007 [1978]) and management through governance of self (Foucault 2011 [1982]), then it becomes clear where these ambitious projects are breaking down. Attempting to implement imposed eco-systems and ecological understandings, systems of trade, and environmental and entrepreneurial subjecthoods with almost no pre-existing market for eco-tourism or craft goods, for example, would be expected to break down with such a limited vision of incorporating local "stakeholders."

Instead, what is required to implement these new forms of capital is in many cases a reformulation, a reformation of lifeworlds. But that may, ultimately, be the goal, and not simply another barrier to be crossed. If reformation of socio-political systems was the means to the end of resource extraction in colonialism, the savvy of contemporary development practice recognizes that the reformation of subjecthoods is actually the goal, while not fully reckoning with the difficulty that may entail. The error the two share may be the fallacy of a "tabula rasa" on which they were and are working. In the case of conservation development projects in Modhupur, however, it is unclear whether altering

subjecthood is the means to conservation or whether conservation is the means to shift subjecthood toward new paradigms of governance.

Prelude: Transforming Governance

Alex: I understand you have a program in Modhupur which takes former forest thieves and turns them into protectors of the forest? That's the local perception, anyway.

Reed Merrill (Chief of Party, IPAC): What? Oh, that's not ours. That's a Forest Department program. But I think that perception may be there because the Forest Department is [chuckling] getting ideas from our programs, and we work closely with them...

Alex: So what would you say your ultimate goal is with IPAC programs? Environmental sustainability?

Reed Merrill: In a way, it's not about the environmental thing at all. The environmental angle is just a window, a way of approaching another issue. Our goal, put simply, is to transform governance.

This goal of transforming governance is multi-faceted in its implementation, but I read several key trends as instrumental. One is heavily reliant on a focus on "local knowledge," introduced in chapter 1 and detailed later in this chapter. IPAC's rendering of the "governance through conservation" problem incorporates local people as a variable, "active stakeholders" whose opinion and subjectivity, it concedes, is integral to implementation of their project. The second is a trend toward bureaucratization and professionalization (Feldman 2003).

My conversations with the former and current Chiefs of Party of IPAC Bangladesh clarified some of the current ways in which NGO work continues to shift in the country. As Shelley Feldman (2003) notes, two aspects of this change include a more close cooperation between government and NGOs and an increasing emphasis on entrepreneurialism, which in turn have also undermined some of the more radical

potential of the enormous NGO sector in Bangladesh. Where formerly, gendered and other problems of structural inequality in state and society were significantly challenged by an active community of NGOs, increasing institutionalization has, to a large extent, “depoliticized” the sector.



Photo 1 - Reed Merrill of IPAC at a field site meeting

This chapter will highlight these three interrelated trends – recourse to local knowledge, cooperation between government and NGO, and entrepreneurialism – via “Alternative Income Generation (AIG)” programs in my field site of Modhupur, Tangail. IPAC is one of the actors heavily engaged in AIG programs in Modhupur, programs that

deploy the narrative of entrepreneurialism and individual investment, and which also engage entrepreneurial-style models in their management practices and overall approach. As evidenced above, IPAC is also invested in a cooperative model that works to effect change through close relationships between large donors, the NGO community, the government, and defined local stakeholders. As IPAC's Chief of Party states, they have no small goal of "transforming governance," though through a seemingly innocuous and palatable "environmentalist" bent. A large part of governance in Bangladesh is done through the NGO sector, and his organization, as a bridge between large donors and local NGOs, plays a role in the transformation of both. IPAC is an example of where this cooperation is taking place, and is an integral part of the ongoing "professionalization" of NGOs in Bangladesh.

Although NGOs have often performed somewhat of a governmental function, "seeing like a state" (Scott 1998), they also have historically served a mediating function and a check on governmental intrusion and, especially in Bangladesh's case, inefficacy and corruption. While, on one hand, this increasing cooperation means more trust and an increased ability to get things done, on the other hand, by cooptation, it greatly decreases the potential of NGOs to pose a challenge to state policy and discourse. This is the case in my field site of Modhupur, where one can witness this still-ongoing transformation of local NGOs (in particular, the indigenous-run AUG) from challenge to the state to one of cooperation and professionalization. Nationally, this shift can be traced in organizations like Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), which is shifting from publishing critical advocacy literature to publishing catalogues of "ethnic groups" and,

more surprisingly, starting a medicinal plants nursery in tune with “alternative income generation” modalities.

The large, USAID-funded IPAC has, as its foremost and explicit goal, the “integration” and “co-Management” of all “stakeholders,” ostensibly wishing to operate like an invisible hand guiding government and civil society into better cooperation. In the case of IPAC and Forest Department income-generation and forest-protection programs in Modhupur, the dividing line between NGO and government is so unclear that, as mentioned in the interview above, the local population in Modhupur is sometimes not able to discern which projects are NGO and which are government; and this confusion is in turn unsurprising to IPAC’s Chief.

What I especially wish to highlight in this chapter, however, is the focus on entrepreneurship, which can be traced in Bangladesh especially to ubiquitous micro-lending programs and also to the “alternative income generation” programs which are prevalent in the Modhupur area. After detailing these programs, I will talk about their efficacy, some of the cultural and social issues at play in their deployment, and describe the intense “climate of suspicion” that surrounds NGO work in this context.

First, I will use the Dhaka-based SEHD to highlight the intense commingling of the themes of conservation and indigeneity in an NGO fetishization of “local knowledges.” Second, I will elaborate on a particular form of development work, currently most visibly enacted by the Bangladesh Forest Department. However, the Forest Department’s work in this area is very much an appropriation of NGO

development themes that have been primarily promoted by IPAC. These micro-credit-informed and environmentally-caged “income generation” schemes I term a brand of “speculative development.” Following that, I will highlight the pre-existing vulnerabilities that make these schemes possible through the lens of two “community forest workers.” Finally, I will discuss several different levels of IPAC’s operation, highlighting some of the problems in its implementation that, on one hand, are read by IPAC employees as locally-specific and political, and on the other hand, reference broader challenges of the implementation of this kind of development scheme.

Below I present the broad forms of development discourse that allow the commonsense linking of environment and indigeneity under the umbrella of “local knowledge.”

Local Knowledges

SEHD exemplifies the powerful discourse of “local knowledge” in the way it relates to notions of indigeneity in Bangladesh. This theme’s prevalence in environmentalist and adivasi discourse is reflected in the themes of a SEHD conference, for example: what kind of subject is believed to be able to appreciate these themes?

Designated discussants:

Dr. Noazesh Ahmed—Destruction of forests and nature leading to cultural erosion
Mr. Dwijen Sarma—Destruction of species affecting forest culture
Farhad Mazhar—Development actions threatening Adivasi Culture
Zakarias Dumri—One nation two languages: the case of Mahali
Rambhajan Koiri—Languages of the tea communities
Ritesh Chakma, Jonik Nokerk, Jerome Hagidag and Mr. Dayal —Value of rituals and medicinal plants
Pavel Partha—Traditional knowledge of ethnic communities
(personal email communication, 2008)

One theme evident in the titles of these speakers' lectures has already been elucidated— cultural diversity and biological diversity are considered intertwined aspects of the same problem. For Dr. Ahmed's and Mr. Sarma's talks, "Destruction of species" and "forests and nature" are "affecting forest culture" and actually "leading to cultural erosion." Thus, although endangerment of particular species or environments may be at stake, and encroachment upon indigenous lands may affect them, these two subjects are closely commingled and talked about in the same language. Rather than simply, in human rights language, people's lands being unjustly taken or forcible migration being visited upon them, cultures here, like land and environments, can actually "erode." Not only individuals or indigenous groups, but scientifically verifiable characteristics and information are under threat from unrestrained development. The "Value of rituals and medicinal plants" and other "traditional knowledge of ethnic communities" are all part of the "Adivasi Culture" in which "development actions" are considered threatening.

Further, however, conferences like these both reflect and participate in a particular contemporary discourse of intervention. That discourse incorporates elements from the distant past, like traces of a "noble savagery" discourse, and is extremely critical of top-down, development as usual. As consistently reaffirmed by my friend Philip Gain, from SEHD, the new discourse is especially critical of "big development," that is, organizations like the ADB and the UNDP. That is not to say that this discourse urges no intervention whatsoever, as it is advocating on behalf of indigenous communities. What it

does advocate for, however, is a focus on “ground-up,” locally based development initiatives.

Organizations like SEHD remain critical of large, internationally-funded development organizations, especially in a journalistic spirit, considering themselves somewhat radical in their approach, which privileges local knowledge. What is particularly interesting, however, is that the UNDP and, to a lesser extent, the ADB, incorporate a very similar type of discourse into their project proposals and analyses, and the Bangladesh Forest Department is not far behind in its deployment of such concepts. Recent UNDP progress reports are completely focused on facilitation of local initiatives, especially by funding small, locally-run NGO operations.¹⁸⁹ Reflecting such local initiative-speak, the Forest Department’s largest such initiative in the Modhupur area is the “Revegetation of Madhupur Forests Through Rehabilitation of Forest Dependent Local and Ethnic Communities” project.

Katherine McKinnon’s (2006) ethnography among NGOs and development workers in northern Thailand reveals very similar themes. McKinnon terms this a new, “pro-local orthodoxy” in development initiatives, embodied most notably in the “mythical pro-local professional” (2006: 26). She finds, as I have for Bangladesh, this pro-localism being deployed, though to slightly different ends, by both larger, more conservative development interests *and* more intimately involved advocacy groups. She argues that the use of “local knowledge” by a multiplicity of actors is evidence of the

¹⁸⁹ However, these UNDP projects involve enormous efforts of coordination and NGO infrastructure-building in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, efforts at “finding common cause.” This type of up-scaling somewhat mirrors mega-NGOs like BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) and Grameen in building networks that, in many cases, supersede the state itself in terms of scale.

idea's flexibility: "their mutual affirmation of a pro-local discourse points to the convenient ambiguity of a rhetoric of 'the local' and the way it can be used for a range of political arguments" (2006: 27). Further, it is widespread: "This also demonstrates the degree to which a pro-local discourse has achieved the status of orthodoxy across the political spectrum." I want to stress, however, that this is not simply a dichotomy between sterile notions of scale, local versus global, but that the idea of local knowledge here, as in SEHD's writing, is tinged with a spiritual universality that is in contrast to a secular, rational West. McKinnon finds that even officials from the Thai Royal Forestry Department are advocating an augmentation of science with "local *wisdom*" and "'natural laws' and ecological imperatives" (2006: 30).

However, this local wisdom and the emphasis on local knowledges, relying in this case also on indigeneity and conservation, is often in this development context implemented through the neoliberal idiom of entrepreneurship, micro-credit, and speculation. Bangladesh's forest space development projects can be characterized by this tension between "the local" as sacred knowledge and "the local" as entrepreneurial development.

Speculative Development

Speculation: lending of money with substantial risk of loss of the principal sum; investment involving high risk but also the possibility of high gain

Micro-credit programs, a staple of development in Bangladesh since the 1980s, have ostensibly transformed rural ways of doing business. In the talk of Grameen Bank founder Muhammad Yunus, there is a certain irony about which he smiles knowingly,

being able to at once scold more traditional and predatory lenders for their greed and for their lack of trust in the poor, while at the same time noting that scientifically, economically, his practices are sound. This tension is at the heart of the way he touts micro-credit as a sort of miracle solution.

In other words, the practice of engaging in micro-credit seems inherently speculative – lending to the poorest of the poor with little to no collateral seems a fool's errand, if not an incredibly risky gamble. Yunus has taken that initial gamble, and his industry continues to do so on a daily basis. His knowing smile, however, is also part of a paternalism which posits that if “the people” are trusted, they will rise to the occasion. A typically skeptical if not bewildered interviewer will say to Yunus, in almost a routine of naïveté, “But how can this be profitable? You must lose all of your money to defaults.” To which Yunus then responds, “No. Actually, our rate of return is nearly 95%, far greater than the rate of repayment of any bank or traditional loan shark.” Most of the details are rarely divulged in Yunus's public statements or appearances, and in Bangladesh, allegations abound regarding the strong-arm tactics of micro-creditors. Whether or not such accounts are factual, they reflect deep-seated mistrust of such large non-governmental entities as Yunus's Grameen Bank, as well as a larger climate of suspicion surrounding NGO culture.

One of the guiding assumptions of micro-credit is that communities, particularly groups of women, via their senses of mutual obligation and avoidance of shame within their communities, are incredibly trustworthy at repayment, and also very industrious in their entrepreneurship and investments. The way this works in different communities may

vary by pre-existing gendered structures and subjectivities. Critiques include the increased burden this places on an already overtaxed population of women within typically quite gendered divisions of labor without contributing to men's employment. Further, the neoliberal entrepreneurial orientation may present a façade of false hopes because not everyone can be an entrepreneur, while putting the burden or responsibility onto the shoulders of the most vulnerable. Perhaps more obvious is the basic vulnerability of someone entering a market-driven supply chain at the tail end, with little recourse if the market fails them. Also notable is the way Yunus's vision and its many offshoots posit a specific cultural interpretation of the poor/subaltern/3rd world subject as "communal," and rely on it as the way to pull otherwise non-capitalist bodies into the capitalist fold on translatable terms.

What I focus on in Modhupur is strongly influenced by the doctrine of micro-credit, but has a slightly different interpretation, and involves a different form of very speculative capital. This is development capital, speculation that investment in 3rd world economies will sufficiently "democratize" or, "transform governance" in order to make 3rd world economies more part of the global capitalist economy, in order to develop the poor and hence, the world as a whole. The other speculative aspect of this investment is that funds channeled from donor countries into the developing world render third world governments more amenable to all kinds of foreign policy initiatives (leaving aside direct "restructuring" programs for the moment).

These are termed "Alternative Income Generation" programs. The premise of such programs is that livelihoods are being generated in unproductive, illegal, or illicit

ways (the downsides of “the local”), and that by providing “alternative” sources via training toward entrepreneurship and other programs, those performing said activities can be reprogrammed toward these more productive ends. Typically, this does not involve substantial repayment of loans, and as such, is a particularly speculative form of investment.

Asif Uddin, president of the Medicinal Agriculture and Conservation Council (MACC) and a self-styled social entrepreneur, describes this approach, which is being circulated among large NGOs, small NGOs like his, and the government:

I already talked to the DFO [District Forest Officer] in the forest department, about this idea. I said, the community forest worker, if they produce these sorts of medicinal plants for the sites, the community forest workers, including the local community, if they do it, I think it has a huge demand in the companies, different companies, in the market. The DFO is actually really interested. He said it's a good proposal so we accept it, so let's work together, huh? So we are giving the seedlings, MACC is giving the seedlings, and the community forest workers, including the local communities, will do it. For their own interest. And if they get income, they'll not go back to the forest to steal again, right?

In Modhupur, the “problem” income-generating source is often those who depend on the forest for a variety of sustenance ends, including tree cutting labor and collection of forest produce. This is usually caged in the language of “illegal tree felling” and environmental devastation, but AIG programs are not directed at wholesalers, transporters, or distributors of timber, but rather at the “local” level at the daily wage laborers such wholesalers employ. This “localization” of reform and development initiatives has been the trend in development for at least a decade (McKinnon 2006). The initiatives rely significantly on “education” and “awareness programs” via seminars and conferences, which aim to reform peoples’ attitudes to the forest, transforming them from perceived casual and disrespectful misuse of the forest to viewing the forest as an

important resource for reasons of aesthetics, national pride, and protection from natural disaster (via “climate change prevention”), if not as a more carefully managed resource and hence more productive in the end. The key challenge, then, is how romance of sacred landscapes might be brought together with a very instrumental view of proper resource management.

I will now briefly introduce two men involved in the Community Forest Worker (CFW) program, easily the most visible (via its innumerable billboards and uniformed participants) of the alternative income generation programs. Then, I will outline some of the structure and problematic of the large, USAID-funded organization that argues it inspired the Forest Department’s initiative and conducts work along similar lines. First, meet Atif and Farid.

Atif & Farid: Two Community Forest Workers

I sat with Atif and Farid at a tea stall across the road from the Agricultural Fair. Being close to Anando’s house, where I often stayed, it was a tea stall I had visited many times. It occasionally had fantastic *dim-parota* (fried bread and eggs) and *baji* (stir-fried vegetables) at breakfast time, but usually served only hot tea, *paan* (betel leaf, nut, and lime paste), and cheap cigarettes. Constructed of a rough wood frame and enclosed by tin sheeting, its only opening faced a larger set of concrete stalls across the brick path it adjoined, meaning very little light got in at any given time of day. As such, it was a

relatively anonymous perch where men could pass their day talking and chewing, despite it being located right next to the main highway.

Unlike the gas-fired stoves at the tea and lunch shops down the road, the clay stove here let off a heavy but pleasant smell of wood smoke, but any sense that this was a *gram* (“village”) rather than a (*bajar*) “market” tea stall was quickly disabused by the constant roaring, rumbling, and honking of buses and large trucks passing by. Between rumbles and honks, friend and IPAC worker Usman and I talked with Atif and Farid, two of the several dozen mostly Bengali Muslim Community Forest Workers who were drifting in and out of the adjacent Agricultural Fair.



Photo 2 - Atif and Farid, community forest workers

Atif is from Aronkhola, in the Modhupur area, while Farid is from Idilpur, meaning he had come some distance to be at the fair. Atif is more positive about the Forest Department's program in which they participate. He considers the forest beautiful, and considers it decent work. But, he says, he is fortunate enough to have 80 decimals of land. The meager 200 taka (around \$3) per week he gets as a salary is not nearly enough for many of the poorer program participants. He has undergone training in what he describes as a variety of environmental programs, including the cultivation of medicinal plants, at the Forest Department office. He patrols the forest and when he finds people illegally felling trees, he attempts to apprehend them. If they claim to have appropriate permissions, his charge is to verify this through the local Beat Officer, who would then contact the Assistant Conservator of Forests for Modhupur if the need arises. Along with the 200 taka per week salary, Atif has been promised an 11,000 taka (\$150) loan from the government at the end of one year as a Community Forest Worker.

Farid, Atif's co-worker, confirms that, in fact, they apprehended two rickshaw vans full of wood recently, scaring off the would-be thieves and confiscating the timber. Farid, though, is not quite as confident about the program itself and how it might help him – he does not have land like Atif does, and the 200 taka per week is nowhere near sustenance for his family. Rather, he feels compelled to participate in the program by circumstance and by feelings of shame:

Another big problem is that I have six cases against me [for illegal tree-felling] by the Forest Department. I would say out of the 500 Community Forest Workers, probably 450 or so have cases against us. We used to use weapons to get trees – I didn't want to do this type of work, but I had to.

I have two sons and one daughter. When my daughter was getting married, her father-in-law said to me, "You are family, but you are still a thief." I was horribly embarrassed, it was

humiliating. So I had to get out of this work. Our fellow villagers even didn't like us. And I don't want my sons to become thieves.
I can be proud of this work. But we need to be able to make a living from it. Now, we are sacrificing a lot of income to be more respectable.

Farid considers *this* work respectable, and elaborates on the value of the work through the environmental messages he received in his training:

This work is important because forests provide oxygen in Bangladesh. (Atif interrupts: "Not just in Bangladesh, but in the whole world.") And we have read since grade school about the beautiful Modhupur Forest, but now it's almost gone. It's a part of our history and our nation, so we should preserve it. Also, Bangladesh is a land of earthquakes, and forests help to prevent damage from earthquakes and other natural disasters.

The message Farid passes on is heavily influenced by talk of climate change. Climate change is one of the foremost up-and-coming aid and development initiatives in Bangladesh, fueled by climate science suggesting that the low-lying delta that makes up the bulk of the country could be submerged within just a few decades. Bangladesh's environmental groups and scientists are extremely busy implementing conferences and programs aimed at the two-pronged approach of mitigation (of climate change) and adaptation (to climate change). Staunchly holding to the West being primarily responsible for mitigation while the developing world should be focused on adaptation, Bangladeshi environmentalists argue that they are at the forefront of innovation in adaptation technologies. Even so, much of the more "standard" and globally familiar language of mitigation, that is, doing one's part locally to reduce carbon load in the atmosphere, seeps in. This is the language that local forest workers like Farid are using, arguing that protecting the forest plays a role in reducing incidences of disasters drive by climate change.

At the end of our conversation, Atif and Farid ask us to pray for them. We watch them exit, in the army green jumpsuit uniforms that, on one hand, afford them a level of status as they now had a respectable though low-paying *chakri* (salary job), while at the same time marking them as poor (former) forest thieves.

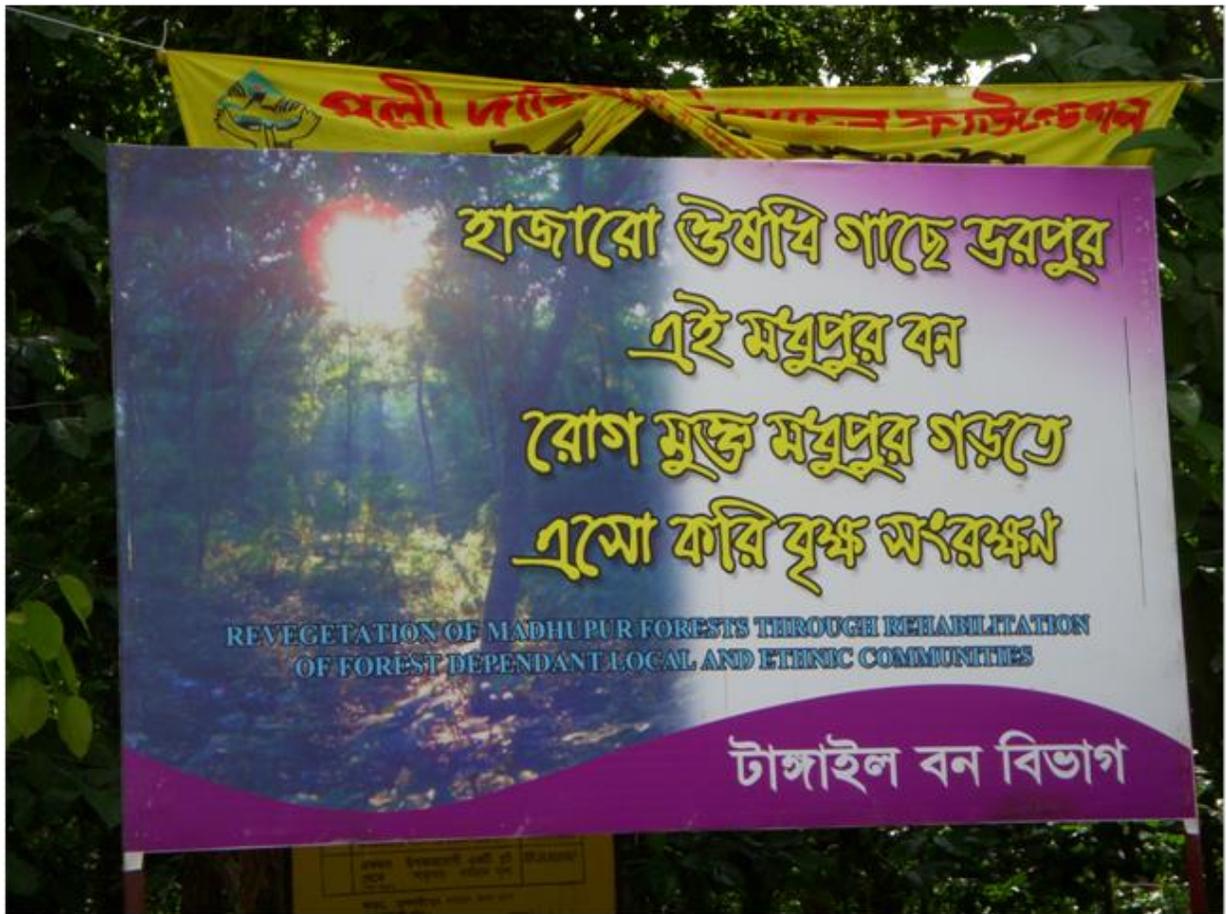


Photo 3 - World's longest project title? Sign for the Tangail Forest Department's AIG program.

The CFW program in which Atif and Farid participate is run primarily by the forest department, though the department contracts with NGOs for many of the training

sessions. The CFW program (at the time of this writing) is nearly the sole component of the program advertised in the sign above. “Revegetation of Madhupur Forests Through Rehabilitation of Forest Dependent Local and Ethnic Communities” is quite an elaborate title, encompassing two broad themes: 1) Abject “ethnic” (read non-Bengali) people in need of “rehabilitation,” and to be more inclusive, also “local” (read Bengali poor) people; and 2) a forest in need of revegetation. How these themes can be related and encompassed by one project, one happening “through” the other, is not elaborated upon on the sign. Atif and Farid’s training about environmental problems and station as “community guards,” as they are often referred to by locals, is the way this is supposed to occur.

Although the program is supervised by the Tangail Forest Department, the ideas for the program primarily originated elsewhere. These initiatives have been promoted by the Integrated Protected Area Co-Management organization, a more recent incarnation of what was formerly called “Nishorgo.” Nishorgo had been the name of a USAID-funded project with the intent to create a national network of parks and wildlife spaces in Bangladesh in conjunction with the Forest Department and the Ministry of Environment. In conjunction with creating those parks as tourist spaces, it has “rehabilitated” minority community members as guides and the like. Part of its main approach has been “co-management,” detailed below, which has been the main focus of the later incarnation as IPAC.

Programs like IPAC’s and the Forest Department’s alike expose if not exacerbate the differential vulnerabilities of various actors. It is usually not the “ultra-poor” (as

termed in development literature) who would possess the economic, social, and cultural capital to take advantage of such programs in the first place, but rather locals with more fungible resources, more education, or more savviness who are better positioned to take advantage of market-based solutions. Whether subsidized “alternative income” programs are ultimately helpful or not (they tend not to make much dent in changing local practices and economies), they remain differentially applied and taken advantage of.

What they may do, however, is more along the lines of IPAC’s overall message that, as its Chief put it, uses protection of forest to effect transformation to “smarter” governance. That is, IPAC views Bengali patronage networks as forms of old-boy cronyism and internal colonialism, and seeks to imbue the local and national governance with a more modern sensibility. What the ultimate goal may be is a more diffuse sense of power, that of liberal governance, in which self-policing and self-regulation play a more measurable role. Atif and Farid articulate some of the motivations and enticements being laid in front of them for collecting their income in a “smarter,” more regulated and more market-based fashion. Further, programs like AIG and its more widely (globally) known cousin, micro-credit, mobilize community-based feelings of honor and shame in the service of making this transformation.

I now return to programs among the Mandi as the primary site of analysis. Although the CFW program in which Atif and Farid participate is largely composed of Bengalis, the program is, at least rhetorically, aimed at ethnic minorities like the Mandi.

Further, the bulk of IPAC's other initiatives in Modhupur, such as craft-making, medicinal plants, and eco-tourism infrastructure, are aimed at the Mandi as well.

In the case of the Mandi, one of the bigger "cultural" barriers to success in making these income transformations is the perceived "inverted" (matrilineal, occasionally matriarchal in contrast to Bengali patriarchy) gender system of the Mandis. In line with micro-credit rhetoric, it is the women who may be most relied upon to be "responsible" with loans and entrepreneurialism. Yet penetrating female Mandi networks is extremely difficult for Bengali male development workers – particularly those viewed as unattached or young. Bengali NGO men talk to Mandi men in trying to achieve their ends, yet their success in transforming community perception relies on both standard micro-credit-cum-AIG practice and in Mandi culture on reaching the women.

The next section details some of what IPAC is doing on the ground in Modhupur forest, in its field office in Modhupur town, and in its central national office in Dhaka. Its parameters illustrate well the trends of bureaucratization and professionalization, which to some degree threaten the political achievements of adivasi NGOs. Also, they utilize the theme of environmentalism and entrepreneurialism to achieve those goals.

IPAC In the Field

We pulled up on motorbikes to the homestead and were warmly greeted and quickly ushered to the veranda and seated on a bench. Bijoy, who I was just meeting for the first time, brought out a bamboo-crafted table and sat it in front of us. My friend Usman, the young "enterprise development" expert for IPAC's office in this region, had

invited me along to this gathering, which was Bijoy's opportunity to host a few of the new partners he had found in IPAC.

As Usman explained to me, gesturing to the woven table in front of us, Bijoy is a bamboo craftsman. Usman went on at length about how skilled Bijoy was at this kind of work, thoroughly impressed and excited at the prospect of working with him. Bijoy, for his part, put several bowls of deliciously spicy chicken curry in front of us, insisting over and over that we take more and more. This serving of meat without rice is, for the Mandi, in the tradition of "spicy snacks with beer," but also somewhat of a luxury and typically only enjoyed with guests or at festivals. *Chu*, Mandi rice beer, was served to all of us without hesitation, and although Usman and his friend protested due to Islamic prohibition, they each partook to some degree, although refusing more than a glass or two. Usman commented to me later that it was quite enough to make him feel a little drunk.

Bijoy explained that he has made a decent enterprise out of this bamboo craft business, including training craftspeople in the Sylhet region and selling his own products to stores in Dhaka. What Usman is trying to do as is his charge at IPAC is to help to develop supply chains to bigger markets, to find what existing and potential opportunities there are for "enterprise development." A key way in which this is performed is via "training programs," for which Bijoy would go on to be a teacher.

Through Bijoy's family resources and entrepreneurial savvy, he is able to offer Usman and IPAC a pre-formed version of what they seek to implement. As such, Bijoy is able to tap into IPAC's resources in order to further his business. However, the training

and hiring of additional employees did not go well. As both Bijoy and Usman lamented, they simply could not find Mandi locals motivated enough to work with them to expand his business.

However, bamboo crafting is just one of several such “enterprise development” initiatives by IPAC. What does this look like in terms of numbers of people involved? Still relatively small at the time of research, here are some of the reported numbers for the Fall of 2009:

- Bamboo: 2 courses with 80 female participants and 2 refresher courses with 50 female participants
- Medicinal plants: 1 course with 12 participants
- Fish pond: 12 courses with 334 participants
- Homestead vegetable gardening: 5 courses with 102 participants
- Weaving: 2 training courses with 32 female participants, and orientation course for 48 participants
- Improved cook stoves: 1 training course with 25 participants
- Cap sewing: 1 course with 30 participants
- Eco-rickshaw puller: 1 refresher course with 21 participants

(INTEGRATED PROTECTED AREA CO-MANAGEMENT (IPAC) Quarterly Progress Report, September – November 2009)

Not all invitees to join the IPAC fold are as eager as Bijoy, however. As a relatively established businessman, and someone with some resources and land to invest or risk, he is particularly well-positioned to take advantage of IPAC’s connections. Yet overall, IPAC has not been well-received in Modhupur, a topic to which I will turn next.

IPAC Breaks Down on the Ground

Young and educated, Usman Mukherjee attended university in the town of Khulna. Although his school was not as reputable or historic as the University of Dhaka

or as cosmopolitan as the extremely expensive newer private universities in the Gulshan area of Dhaka, Usman's family has given him the resources and the cultural capital to become quite successful in the non-governmental or business fields in Bangladesh. Perhaps more important to Usman's success than the cultural capital gained from his family is that gained from working for an American company before he started university. Particularly fluent in English, Usman was able to gain employment as a representative working on the phone selling IT products to American businesses. Usman's fluency in English as well as American stylistic conventions and ways of doing business rendered him quite attractive to foreign (particularly U.S.) and foreign-affiliated non-governmental organizations. Further, like James (director of SEHD) and Asif Uddin (director of MACC, detailed in a later chapter), Usman is quite adept quickly gaining familiarity with new languages, cultural styles, and ways of doing business.

While Usman was finishing his degree at Khulna University, he applied for a position with the large and well-funded IPAC, a position in "enterprise development" for the organization's Tangail branch, with its field office in Modhupur town. A testament to Usman's savviness is his selection for the position over his primary competitor, a man named Anando Simsang, who provided me a place to stay for much of my fieldwork in Modhupur. Anando was much older than Usman, had much more familiarity with the problematic site that was Modhupur, and more than a decade of experience as a project organizer with Catholic charity organization Caritas. What Anando did not have was Usman's savvy in being able to present himself as cosmopolitan and entrepreneurial in orientation. Anando had not taken this rejection lightly, and mentioned it often, as he

somewhat dejectedly sought a variety of investment strategies in land and crop production in order to provide for his family after his “retirement” from Caritas.

Usman brought this savvy and entrepreneurial drive with him to work in the office and at field sites. While often not taken seriously because of his age and his unmarried status, Usman would contend that what should be far more important in evaluating him was his ability and work ethic. Sometimes he failed – among Mandi women, for example, Usman was rarely taken seriously as an unmarried, young, Bengali male – but he more often succeeded, particularly in NGO circles.

A few weeks after visiting Bijoy’s craft operation, my friend Edward and I met Usman and a local Mandi IPAC employee beside a large pond near Lohoria. The IPAC employees have just come from the Lohoria beat office, where they had been talking with a forest guard about the potential of this pond for aqua-culture. We walk along the lake, exploring it end-to-end, and Usman takes the opportunity to engage with Edward, who happens to be a Mandi purveyor of adivasi-craft-type goods and a relatively knowledgeable local. After surveying Edward a bit about what his family members and community are doing to generate income, Usman scolds Edward for their foolishness and squander (their inability to be “properly” entrepreneurial). I can’t help but notice that he is ignoring the very failed and overgrown tourist structure of yesteryear we are actually standing beside – two dilapidated toilets and a roofed patio structure that is collapsing – which would cast doubt on the perspectives of speculative development that Usman eagerly advocates while scolding Edward for not having better business sense. Edward, surprisingly, seems relatively nonplussed by the insult.

From there, we move back to the beat office, past several signs for the “Rehabilitation of Forest Dependent Ethnic Communities” program, to see the area’s attraction – a sizable deer pen and a small cage of biscuit-partial monkeys. The deer pen itself draws almost no income for the Forest Department, but is one of the “things to do” that keep the winter picnickers happy in their jaunts out of town. The beat officer is polite, and after a few glasses of iron-flecked water, we thank him and move to the local tea stall.

Asroy and Edward, as the Mandi locals of our group, make some introductions, and Usman strikes up a conversation by passing around some tea and cigarettes. Usman explains what IPAC is doing to one of the skeptical fishermen of the nearby pond – its modality of “co-management,” and their intention to help these fishermen, to invest in increasing the yield of and market for fish from the pond. A much older man wearing a white beard, *tupée* (hat), glasses, a *lungée* (sarong) and a *gumcha* (handkerchief/towel) listens quietly in the background, and eventually sits down next to the fishermen to participate in the conversation.

The man is obviously skeptical of Usman and his intentions, and gets extremely heated about brick kilns and eco-park walls that he sees as environmentally destructive, while an organization like IPAC is there talking about environmental sustainability and doing nothing about these problems. The man gets even more adamant about the power relationships involved in this supposed cooperative management system. He makes the argument that although people like himself may be invited to participate at “co-

management” meetings, it’s really the bigwigs like the Assistant Conservator of Forests, the District Commissioner, and even Members of Parliament who will really be listened to at such a meeting; that their voices are drowned out anyway. For this man, “co-management” is a fallacy, and he is extremely skeptical of any “help” in generating income.

IPAC’s poor reception in Modhupur is varied and complex, though many of the valences of extreme mistrust of IPAC stem mainly from its association with eco-tourism (elaborated upon in chapter 5). Yet it is also intimately related to the suspicion locals feel about the supposed incorporation of their voices, and their proven perception that these programs tend to help the already well-off.

Although IPAC has backed off its eco-tourism initiatives in Modhupur in recent years mainly due to this resistance, IPAC has trouble divesting itself of its reputation. While at least among the young, the recent shootings of eco-park protestors are the most salient issue, Mandi leaders will rarely discuss those shootings without putting them in the context of the history of land tenure in the Modhupur Forest.

What is amazing to me is how this logic appears to completely escape IPAC employees. It appears to them as merely a paranoid fantasy, if not just the machinations of corrupt adivasi leaders. While a central point of my later analysis will be the general “climate of suspicion” among the NGO community, where I find these suspicions far more understandable is among the Mandi, who have a history at least a century long of wrangling with the Forest Department, government, and Bengali opportunists (see Chapter 1).

Next, I will summarize IPAC's perception of its failures in Modhupur through the words of its Chief, a perspective quite distinct from that of the Mandi men above.

The Central IPAC Office

Back in the shiny, air-conditioned, IPAC administrative offices in the wealthy Dhaka neighborhood of Banani, Chief of Party Reed Merrill admits to me with a smile that they have had problems with reception in the Modhupur Forest Area. At first, he chalks this up largely to local politics. There is a lot of mistrust, he admits, between locals and the Forest Department. "It's a difficult site." Modhupur, however, is the exception that proves the rule for Reed, displaying why co-management is what is necessary. In Modhupur it is just this factor of lack of cooperation that is the problem. If he can get people to feel a sense of participation, to trust their government and the NGO sector, then real progress can be made.

Instead, all people want to hear about is poverty alleviation, he laments. He complains people only respond to direct poverty alleviation measures, not the "big picture." Environmentalist thinking, for example, works with the elite, but at the local level, this kind of big picture thinking cannot be implemented. He sees his movement as organic, as inclusive. Co-management is what is necessary for resilience, just as awareness is necessary for conservation, and the end results are biodiversity and equitable social development.

What keeps me going is the idea of empowerment. Conservation becomes an entry point, also improving resilience. Food security, for example—everyone thinks let's crank out as many calories as possible but resilience is the ability to cope with disaster. Sustainability, choice, and a celebration of diversity are what we're about.

This familiar rhetoric of sustainability and empowerment, however lofty and abstract, is achieved by another ambitious goal: cooperation. What “the locals” are lacking is cooperation, and this is the basis for the final word in his organization’s acronym: “Co-management.” “People working in one ‘sector’ aren’t talking to people working in another ‘sector’.” He continues:

Participation in itself is appealing to people here. Bangladesh is a place where many people simply do not have the opportunity to participate in things – government, or anything. So participation in anything can be appealing, fun – it could be conservation, a soccer team, whatever. Being involved with something, or even being the leader of something.

There are multiple ironies with his explanation, including the advocacy of civic-engagement-oriented development coming from USAID funding from the U.S., where civic engagement and responsive government are viewed by many as at all-time lows. Further, one of the key avenues of intervention for IPAC is “enterprise development,” programs that try to link locals into an impersonalized market. His analysis posits near-non-existent social relations, a practical blank slate on which to write the story of the implementation of civic participation. The role of IPAC, then, is to bring people to the table – to illuminate them in the ways of democracy and “good governance,” to educate people that things can turn out for the better if you would just work together. Learn to share your toys is his message, join the PTA. Yet this intervention’s supposed beauty is, in fact, that it is non-interventionist; it presents itself, rather, as an “organic” movement.

So how does this organizational manifesto translate to the “field level”? That is, beyond their administrative links, what does it look like when the Chief of Party of IPAC comes to a place like Modhupur? As mentioned earlier and as Reed references, there are

as of yet no “success stories” in Modhupur itself. So instead, Reed encouraged me to look at places in which IPAC programs have been successful and to compare them to the unsuccessful Modhupur programs. An example from their website, a story from Chittagong, a place analogous in some ways to Modhupur, is instructive.

This “Success Story” report from USAID Bangladesh’s website advertises the recent efficacy of their AIG programs in wilderness areas. Though making no illusions about being published by USAID itself, the report is framed like a newspaper article, with the women’s own words and stories as central and the IPAC program as the background. This positioning of IPAC in the background fits Reed’s description of the organization as a mere facilitator, “creating avenues” for more productive social relations, though the program itself attempts to transform local labor. There is an accompanying photograph of three women shyly looking away from the camera with a half-woven basket between them, taken by Reed Merrill himself, we can gather, on a sort of field visit to Chittagong.



Photo 4 - Women of Medha Kachapia. From a USAID "success story" article. Photo by Reed Merrill, IPAC Chief of Party

The headline is: “Alternative Source of Income Changes Lives in Bangladesh: Co-Management ensures livelihood” with the caption:

USAID funded Integrated Protected Area CoManagement (IPAC) Project continues to create avenues for alternative sources of incomes for forest and wetland dependent individuals while building a strong co-management system between the government and local communities.

Let’s look at the words of “the women themselves”:

‘We used to sit at home before, our husbands were often involved with illegal logging due to dire financial struggles, but now we no longer need to turn to the trees, we are financially independent.’

There is a lot contained in this statement. “We used to sit at home before,” reflects idleness, the antithesis of entrepreneurial activity. “Our husbands were often involved with illegal logging due to financial struggles” captures the illicitness of their husbands’ activities but justifies them as elements of victimhood – they are the poor, and needed money. “But now we no longer need to turn to the trees” is an implicit association of both the value of “saving trees” and of a direct connection with the wild as a debased form of income generation. “We are financially independent,” finally, captures the (American) spirit of entrepreneurship and the logic lying behind neoliberal development. The biblical parable of “Teach a man to fish” lies just beneath the surface of development-speak here. What is striking is how this one concise “quote” is so economical in capturing so much of the Alternative Income Generation ideology.

This is attributed to Halima, of Medha Kachapia, Chittagong. That someone made such a concise statement recapitulating the complex associations of IPAC’s program ideas – unproductive women with outlaw husbands being recuperated to new productive entrepreneurship while saving trees – is extremely doubtful. It is, however, possible, that this is part of Halima’s story, and that these were sentiments she (or she as a composite character of this group of women) expressed to the writer here. It might also be noted, however, the power relationship she would be involved in while Mr. Merrill, an extremely powerful American and IPAC Chief of Party, visited their project site with his entourage at the time the picture was taken and the report produced. What kind of

preparation were these women given for the arrival of such a guest by eager local project managers? The embarrassed women in the photograph gesture toward this problem. These complexities aside, let's assume that to some degree this statement was made by Halima, and reflects the success of IPAC's objectives. It remains, of course, a deliberate framing, a representation.

The story concludes, "She wants her children and her community to prosper. She said proudly 'Why should we just sit around when we know now there is a better life waiting for us?'" The invocation of children both links her to her gendered motherhood role and provides a relatively universal element of sympathy, while "community" is both a buzzword of development invoking "the local" and a pre-formed sense of how society is organized in post-colonial (non-Western) spaces – communally – also a key facet of micro-credit planning. The final quote, "Why should we just sit around when we know now there is a better life waiting for us," is almost chilling in its efficient utility – it invokes the profligate and lazy "native" who has been educated out of hopelessness and into the simple realization that if only she works hard, takes responsibility, and simply learns a "decent" trade, she can integrate into the benefits of small-scale capitalist production. If the American entrepreneurial dream is failing on America's own shores, it surely lives on in Medha Kachapia.

Halima's community's environmental vulnerability rendered them victims to flooding in Cox's Bazaar, causing their "forest dependence" in the first place. The story proudly touts her incorporation into a "market-driven value chain" as the security they

were looking for, neglecting the extreme insecurity of being at the tail end of such a market chain.

In the next section, I describe the daily frustrations in attempting to implement such ambitious and sweeping transformations in Modhupur.

The Daily Work of Implementation: the IPAC Field Office in Modhupur Town

On a typical afternoon in the IPAC field office that occupies half of a small residential building's ground floor,¹⁹⁰ work has slowed down a bit from the morning, but will soon pick up full speed again. "It's just after our lunch, so it's lazy time," jokes the outreach coordinator. The accounts manager is working on a budget on an Excel spreadsheet at a desktop computer, and Usman, the enterprise development officer, is working on his laptop. The office page-boy, one of five or so "local" (Modhupur Mandi) employees, delivers some biscuits and strong tea. I sit on the opposite side of Usman's desk, surrounded by posters of trees, birds, and flowers, with green motif backgrounds and slogans, some in English and some in Bengali, like "the forest is our strength" and "diversity is our benefit" and "save one tree, save the whole forest."

These grand slogans come from somewhere else. They come from the grand offices in Dhaka, and from grand discourses and powerful ideas from abroad. It is here, in the field office, that staff have to translate those ideas into something workable in

¹⁹⁰ The other half is occupied by Shakti Foundation, another NGO that primarily performs micro-credit and enterprise-building with women, work not too dissimilar from IPAC's. This arrangement is typical of "town" NGO offices in Bangladesh – an apartment in a residential neighborhood close to but not in the center of town.

Bangladesh's communities, and something that will provide reportable results back to those Dhaka offices. Frustrations abound.

Usman had recently returned from Dhaka, where he was meeting with traders who were interested in bamboo crafts like the ones Bijoy makes. However, he said, these things are almost invariably bound to fail. "People here just don't trust each other, and if one says they don't trust another, the whole thing breaks down. I can't get the goods delivered because they haven't been paid for, and I can't get an investment because the goods haven't been delivered." In the end, he just ends up stuck as the market chain's middleman, with "no output."

The outreach coordinator seems equally frustrated. I ask how it's going and he laughs sadly and says, "Not well, we are just trying to do our environmental thing and coordinating lots of people and it's always problems. Always lots of complications." Usman echoes that there are too many people involved, too many different interests. "I've organized a medicinal plants meeting this Wednesday and Thursday. If I invite these guys, I have to invite these guys [gesturing here and there], and I have to keep inviting people and involving people so that everyone's happy. Then there are too many people involved, and it's impossible to reach consensus. I mean, even our office staff were nearly fighting because we couldn't agree on the best way to go about this."

Usman suggests we step in to a guest room they keep to have a smoke. Still frustrated with his work, Usman continued to elaborate on their insurmountable task by talking about corruption. "It's so large-scale! The Forest Department is just making tons of money selling off Government land in Bhawal (another protected area where IPAC

works); the police are making money; everyone is just thinking about his own self-interest. In Bangladesh, if you have 10 million dollars, you can manipulate the whole share market, it's so small. People with 1 or 2 million dollars really can't make anything because it's all manipulated.”

Usman and his co-workers were charged with implementing “co-management” of vast amounts of resources, involving varied and powerful “stakeholders” at the helm, and frustrated and mistrustful locals as supposed equals. Their difficulties and frustrations, as such, were quite substantial. As interlocutors of a sort, the employees in the Modhupur field office were frustrated with both powerful people and powerful cultural and economic systems that were outside of their control, as well as locals with whom they had enormous difficulties translating the ideas of environmentalism and entrepreneurship. The latter tension often revealed itself in miscommunications and misgivings between the managers, who were educated and from elsewhere but living in apartments in Modhupur town, and the “local staff,” who were Mandis from the villages employed primarily as cultural mediators and local representatives of IPAC to their communities.

Conclusion: Anthony on IPAC

Was the problem mostly one of lack of trust and lack of cooperation, as many in the management of IPAC argued? Of inability for abstraction and big-picture thinking, as Chief Reed Merrill insists? Some locals accept this argument, agreeing that local political squabbles are a hindrance to societal advancement. In this respect, they may also find some agreement in the Catholic Church, or at least its most influential long-time local

advocate, Father Samuel Bergman, who incessantly complains about local politics and corruption. They may also find some agreement in local leader Anthony Marak, someone who has stood with IPAC and against community leaders who have denounced IPAC's activities. I waited until I had known Anthony a while before I asked him about his involvement with this controversial organization.

While sitting on the veranda of his wife's family's compound, Anthony went on at length about some family land disputes he had been trying to resolve after a death in the family. He sat in only a lungee, cooling off from spending the morning working in the small plot in front of his house. Occasionally, he would shout some instructions to the three laborers present who were walling in the adjacent section of his veranda as a storage room and extra bedroom to be used by his daughter, a college student, when she visited home. He offered me tea and biscuits, and I asked him about IPAC.

Anthony: Yeah, yeah, yes, yes. I am personally involved there as a Chairman of the People's Forum and also Vice-Chairman of the CMC (Community Management Committee). I don't know what will happen in the future, but I'm listening to their talk, no? Or motivations, or what purposes they work for. I think it is working in other places. So, they are very much concerned about natural resources, no? The environmental side of things. The biodiversity side. So, I personally, I like it. And also they are giving importance especially to the minority people, how to develop them. So in the future, then I will gather whether it is actually good or bad. Yes? But as far their project proposal? What I have seen so far, it's good.

Alex: So what is their basic proposal?

Anthony: Co-management, no? Co-management, actually not working directly. They are depending on the respective area organizations like the CMC and People's Forum. They will decide, they will chalk out the project, how people develop is their own choice, huh? Like this local area. And how you will develop your natural environment. Like this. So they will not directly implement it, "I am telling you to do this, you have to do it." Not like that. So, in the Modhupur area, in this situation, what is the condition of the natural forest? What is the condition of the Sal forest? So, and, now the new trees, you know, like, foreign trees, like Kashmoni? Are they actually helpful or harmful? So, they are telling us, you think about it. Natural Sal forest is good or unnatural forest is good? Which is good, you will decide in your organization. At meetings together.

Alex: Have you had any meetings yet?

Anthony: Only one meeting. With the Director. He came and he especially wanted to meet the leaders, the Chairman, Vice Chairman, or others. And they already suggested getting an orientation course, maybe this month. A one-day orientation course will be held, no? And for this (forest) range two parts have already been divided. One CMC is for Dokhola range and another CMC will be at Rosulpur range. So, a one-day orientation will be at first for them, and then for us. This is their plan. And another plan already told to us is cross-tourism. Tourism maybe for knowledge, no? There is another place that also has a CMC, and has been working maybe two, three, or four years already running. So we will go to another IPAC to observe: How are they working? What is the situation? To see and to observe. To get the knowledge. Then maybe the first week of May, they will chalk out the program.

Anthony has thoroughly listened to IPAC's argument. He understands the argument of the connection between biodiversity and indigeneity, the rhetoric of local knowledges, the approach of "participation," and the idea that in some other places in Bangladesh this strategy has worked quite well. He has even been encouraged by a direct visit from the Chief of Party himself. And at least tentatively, he believes in the possibility of the program working. One thing particularly surprising to me is that IPAC had mentioned tourism to Anthony. Though in broader Bangladesh tourist promotion has been integral to IPAC's programming, in Modhupur the taint of the "eco-park wall" has lately induced IPAC to disavow any intentions of tourist promotion. Local opponents of IPAC view tourism as the sinister hidden motive behind the broader "co-management" and "alternative income generation" roles.

IPAC, as a structured and well-funded organization, has faced many obstacles in the implementation of its environmental program by vocational educational initiatives, nearly to the point of failure in Modhupur. In my final chapter I detail how a different type of organization has fared, one with almost no resources and no organizational

structure, in accessing the benefits of this entrepreneurial modality of alternative income generation and speculative development.

In the next chapter I focus specifically on the environmental aspects of the Modhupur problem. That is, how are trees and environment thought about and represented in this area? As an intrinsic part of “indigenous” peoples’ experience as “forest people”? How have Mandi mobilized since the 1960s an identity as part of the forest and protected their interests as such?

As highlighted in this chapter and, in particular, chapter 3, Mandi have a somewhat recent trend of oppositional politics, and their involvement in recent abuses (the murder of Piren Snal and Cholesh Ritchil) has solidified for them a position of martyrdom (a culturally powerful image indeed) against the state and known-to-be-corrupt forest department. In contrast, AIG programs and NGO-sponsored Wangalas may serve to undermine such oppositional politics. But politics of environment are never too far afield. Rather, some of the same politics of (environmental) opposition are being co-opted, a vital move by the Forest Department and NGOs involved in AIG. So the environment, the forest, and its perceived (and actual) scarcity are a key means of contestation and power in the political economy of Modhupur.

Environmental tourism, often offered as a great solution for AIG and forest protection simultaneously, remains elusive if not impossible in Modhupur. Yet, this language is crucial to the Forest Departments’ and many NGOs’ self-perception.

Chapter 5 - Forest Preservation, Tourism, and Eco-Park Walls

Alex: And biodiversity is part of your mission also?

David: Yeah, biodiversity actually just because our people, indigenous people, they live in a “biodiversity” environment. Therefore we say this, though we have no special activities to preserve biodiversity. But our people are living in the biodiversity. Like, they want to keep surrounded by the biodiversity in their village or in their house. That is the main view.

Alex: So BELA (Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers’ Association) is involved here because of the biodiversity, because of the environmental issues?

David: Yeah, and because here is the forest. They want to keep the environment in the area, and when we spoke against the ecopark movement, or the ecopark wall, then they came to our area. Normally they had no any work in this area. When we started the ecopark movement, then they came, gradually. And other human rights organization also, they came, in this area. (conversation with D. Simsang, Mandi leader and chair of Adivasi Upliftment Group, a Mandi advocacy organization)

And another thing, since the proposal of the eco-park, they were going to construct a brick wall for surrounding only 3,000 acres. What will happen to the other natural forest areas? All will be cleared up. And those areas will be encroached by the local people. So are you able to squeeze the jungle into 3,000 acres only? So that’s why we protested, “No! We will not give you the chance to squeeze the jungle, the natural jungle into only 3,000 acres!”

The government has taken 15,000 acres of land for rubber plantation, 1,000 acres for a firing and bombing range. And they are making the, what’s it called, the no-man’s *chor* [island] of 3,000 acres of forest to preserve the wild animals when they boom, when they blast and they boom and they... What’s it called? The airplane flights make incredible noise, so will the wild animals be able to stay there? When the booming and the firing started here, from then on many wild animals fled from this area. So, how ridiculous that you are going to make a no-man’s zone where the animals will be here in peace. I don’t find any sense in this. (Benedict Mangshan, Mandi elder)

How does “the environment” come to be important to the definition of a place?

Perhaps more importantly, in what ways do competing visions of what the value and use of what forest means conflict or coalesce?

In this chapter, I detail the push toward environmental subjecthood¹⁹¹ and governance in Modhupur, one of Bangladesh's forest spaces. Through interviews and ethnography with young, educated activists in Dhaka engaged in protection of Bangladesh's forest spaces and broader environment, the history of adivasis in these forest spaces, and current environmental contestation in Modhupur, I outline the links, often through Non-Governmental Organizations but increasingly through government channels, between global environmentalist visions and local spaces where these visions are implemented. From these local forest spaces in Bangladesh, through to local, national, and international connections, people relate in sometimes similar and other times divergent subjecthoods relative to the protection of "nature" and natural resources. In its broadest sense, the global environmental discourse participates in an imaginary of governance; however, when this translates at national and local levels nature protection may not be envisioned in the same way, while many of the same themes and symbolic may be utilized. The link, sometimes present and sometimes absent, to an environmental subjecthood, often relies on appreciation of nature in touristic, often voyeuristic and binaristic (nature-culture) ways.

As detailed in earlier chapters, environmentalism interacts strongly with indigeneity and the attempted fashioning of alternative, entrepreneurial livelihoods by non-governmental organizations. What this chapter shows in particular are the ways that environmental concern among an educated elite in Dhaka comes into interaction with rural priorities for resource use.

¹⁹¹ As detailed in chapter 1, defined as identifying with the project of the importance of forest and natural space as crucial.

I begin by describing the massive USAID-sponsored IPAC/Nishorgo efforts aimed at reforming and re-implementing a national park system in Bangladesh. Then, I describe how adivasis are incorporated into a version of “eco-tourism” which presents adivasi culture as part of the pristine, natural environment. Next, I detail some of the ways in which adivasis have actively contested incorporation into eco-tourism and other environmental projects. I conclude by presenting a case in which global environmental concern comes to mean something very different among its target group of people (Mandi women) in a forest space.



Figure 11 - Entrance and fees sign for Lawachara National Park

Visions of Forest: National Environmental Objectives

Integrated Protected Area Co-management (IPAC), detailed as instrumental in implementing Alternative Income Generation to the Modhupur area in chapter 4, is simultaneously an integral part of the recent history of mechanisms to shape Bangladesh's forests and forest department land into a "modern" system of parks and preserves, bolstered by tax and tourist funds. As the argument goes, Bangladesh's forest cover is rapidly shrinking nearly to the point of non-existence in the majority of the country, and the primary way to conserve it will be through this type of park system.

What is envisioned for Modhupur yet still largely absent is already in operation in north-eastern Bangladesh in Lawachara National Park, close to Srimongol, Sylhet (see map below). Lawachara is the most visible of the Nishorgo project parks, with some of the most extensive "eco-tourism" infrastructure in the country. With hiking trails, signage describing flora and fauna, tour guides, and tourist stalls selling refreshments, Lawachara ostensibly offers something more "sophisticated" than the typical Bangladesh "picnic spot". While "the picnic", getting out together for a lunch outdoors, in a public park or semi-wooded area, is "a Bangladeshi institution" (van Schendel 2009: 264), the facilities at Lawachara appeal to an educated and "modern" consumer of nature in and of itself.

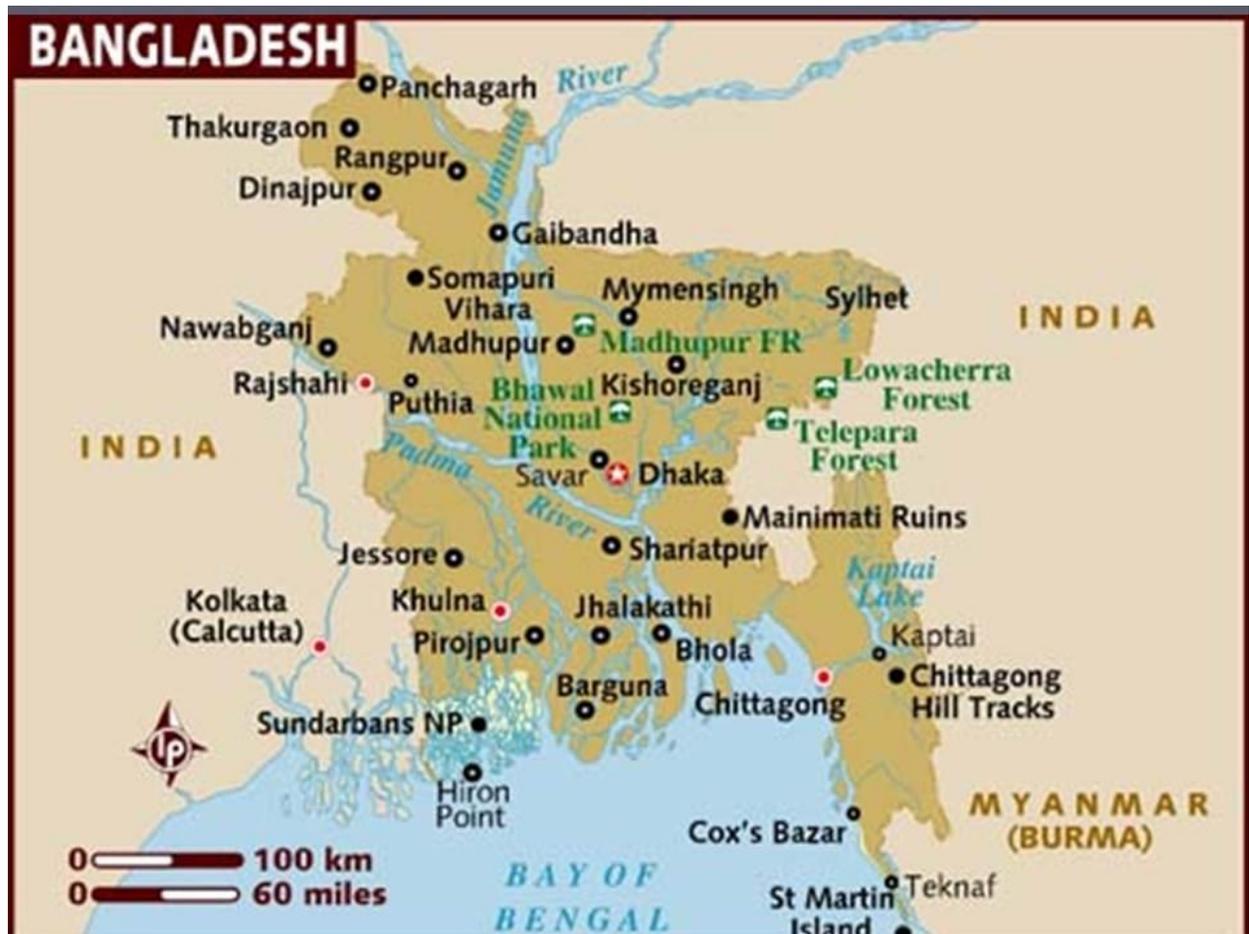


Figure 12 - map of Bangladesh, showing Lawachara in Srimongol ("Lowacherra") and Modhupur ("Madhupur")

Lawachara has fixed entrance fees, and signs cataloguing and displaying tree, bird, and primate species, and extensive lists of rules for “proper” engagement with nature in this designated park space. In fact, many of the rules for the park run counter to standard “picnic” use of such types of public space in Bangladesh, used for family, school, and community gatherings more closely aligned with *mela* or carnival-like use of space. Rather than envisioning more widespread “picnic spot” use of public green space in Bangladesh, instead park signs recall rules and regulations more commonly found in private and guarded spaces like gated parks in wealthy neighborhoods like Baridhara and

Bonani, in Dhaka's Gulshan area. While typical picnic staples like amplified pop music, *biryani* (meat, potato, and yogurt cooked into rice) boxes and snack foods with disposable containers, and games of cricket, football (soccer), or *kabaddi* [a game of competitive team tag] may be prohibited, quiet reverence for the spectacle of nature, trees, and bird and primate sounds is strongly encouraged.



Figure 13 - A sign of rules for the somewhat exclusive park space in Baridhara, including, among other things, encouragement to keep the park tidy and prohibiting use for public functions and wearing of the symbolically lower-class male *loongi* (sarong) garment

Lawachara's moderate success as an eco-tourism attraction, attracting the attention of (particularly young) educated, affluent Bangladeshis as well as foreign ex-patriots and the occasional Lonely Planet¹⁹²-style adventure tourist, is often touted by IPAC and its former incarnation *Nishorgo* ("idyllic nature"),

as a model for the potential of this mode of conservation in Bangladesh. What the mode comprises, again, is a Western-style approach to conservation of forest spaces, which involves setting aside some amount of forest land as protecting flora and endangered species. This is accomplished through promoting the value of conservation of "nature" in

¹⁹² An independent guidebook series associated with Western backpacker and off-the-beaten-track tourism.

and of itself and for general “environmental” purposes. This is also offset by “alternative” (to logging and the collection of forest produce) uses and income generation. This involves, however, two interrelated symbolic operations. One is the fostering of environmental “awareness-raising” among the general public and among the adivasis who live in and around the protected space. The second is a privileging of forms of entrepreneurial “livelihood strategies” which will ostensibly free the local populace from their “dependence” on the forest resources in need of protection. (See, in particular, chapter 4 for detail of this “alternative income generation” being attempted in Modhupur.) The two are linked in an operation which ties both capital and governance directly into the mission of environmentalism, also understood to be uniting divergent rural and urban subjectivities:

People have realized that there can be no agricultural development without water – the supply of which is guaranteed by forests. This directly affects rural farmers who have been living in and around natural ecosystems. Urban citizens, living a stressful modern life, instinctively desire the mental relief provided by nature, as represented by forests. Forests are attaining a more symbolic meaning to these people. Thus, the “conserve nature (this mostly means ‘Forests’)” slogan voiced by environmental NGOs or journalists has been winning the sympathy of citizens. Both rural and urban people have started to feel that there is little sense in environmental protection, biodiversity conservation and public welfare without protecting forests. As a result, the Forest Department (FD) of Bangladesh has responded with the creation of a new protected areas management program called “Nishorgo” (Patwary, Nishorgo 2007).

Through mission statements like these, then, Nishorgo/IPAC also sets out with the goal (realized through voicing links between livelihoods such as “alternative income” and agriculture) of rendering these programs relevant to all Bangladeshis rather than just empty signifiers of nostalgic nature.

In order to better understand some of the awareness-raising projects required for this style of conservation, I will proceed to discuss the work of some young environmentalists in Dhaka. These young environmentalists represent the types of model citizens envisioned by organizations like Nishorgo/IPAC, the British Council, and the Bangladesh Center for Advanced Studies, who are promoting and funding the work of nature conservation in Bangladesh.

Campaigners of the Earth

Amrita: I've been working on environmental projects since I was a student. And I've noticed that so many projects in Bangladesh are short-term. Especially when we depend on international funds. They want to finish their project and get out. We wanted to do biodiversity conservation, and we want to show that our people can take responsibility and get involved. Like conserving Lawacharra National Park -- who can sustain it? International groups? At the end of the day, the international people leave, and then what?

Amrita Khan was selected as one of Bangladesh's 2010 "Earth Campaigners", funded by the British Council and implemented by Bangladesh Center for Advanced Studies (BCAS). As is the case for each of the nearly thirty Earth Campaigners of that year, she submitted an essay and project idea addressing an environmental issue in Bangladesh. Amrita's project submission involved the aforementioned Lawacharra National Park. I met with Amrita several times, along with another young environmentalist, Anil, who had been working closely with Amrita on her Earth Campaigners project. Both of them subsequently worked in the IPAC office in Bonani, Dhaka, where I spoke with them at length:

Amrita: Basically we planned to tell people that if you conserve the forest, we are all safer. To local people, and also to higher officials. And through youth also. If leaders change and academic institutions change, it can be more sustainable. The initial plan was nationwide. But it had to be yearlong, and we only had a small amount of funding. So if it's successful in Lawacharra, we thought, we can move on and do it other places.

Anil: We thought that it would be better if we stick to one specific place, with a specific goal, not too broad. Since we have that experience working with youth, we also try to engage locals, and make small changes.

Implicit in the description of their project is the idea that non-governmental work often aims too broadly, accomplishing watered-down implementation of attempts to meet all goals everywhere. In their efforts to avoid these trappings, they tried to be pragmatic, but retained optimism that by demonstration and their own efforts, they could affect broader change of opinion. Through International Education University's Environmental Club, Amrita arranged outings to Lawacharra, helped to implement signage raising "awareness" of the proper way to conduct oneself (quietly, and with reverence in the form of not littering or damaging wildlife) on Lawachara's land and trails:

Amrita: The thing is, if the tourists harm your park, there will be no income from tourism. If your park gets degraded, the forest will not be as healthy. You must have seen how the tourists litter, and make noise on their picnics? *We are changing irresponsible tourists into eco-tourists.*

She also arranged programs involving rural youth who, for the most part, had not previously been exposed to the ideas of environmental conservation. Amrita's environmental mentorship program for rural youth aligned well with IPAC's vision of uniting urban and rural environmental subjectivities:

Amrita: Our project went really well, it was accepted well at the local level. The main idea was to link urban and rural youth together. And we also went to indigenous people, and to local headmen. We thought at first that maybe youth intervention into deforestation would not be accepted, but it actually went really well. The high schools permitted us and we were allowed to do an "awareness program". We gathered twelve leaders from each high school, and did a training session. I think they accepted it well because of youth, children working well together. We had University students go to

Lawacharra and work with younger students there, college students and secondary school also. They got involved in fund-raising, awareness within their schools, and also spreading awareness in their own homes, telling their parents about it.

In addition, Amrita helped to arrange photo exhibitions and a sort of “urban forest” demonstration project consisting of an elaborate display of plants and nature sounds in an empty classroom at her University, in order to better educate the International Education’s affluent, urban students about the value and close proximity of Bangladesh’s natural spaces:

Anil: We tried to do a photography exhibition with a natural set-up rather than the conventional set-up, we brought in raw materials, decorated it with them, formed a natural landscape to get students interested.

Amrita: Basically the idea for this, we used to call it “the encounters”, the idea was like we would have a photo exhibition but the focus would be more of the photos relating to nature, and the fact that that nature could be brought over here and we need to keep that nature that way. So the photos we showed were of biodiversity, of landscapes and animals, etcetera, etcetera, and whatever was on display as a picture we tried to recreate that in real life. As in, basically we built an indoor forest. We had all the sounds, and the smells, and real dirt and water. People loved it. They were like, so this is how a forest feels? ‘Cause most of them never went outside their homes, they were like, I know there is a part outside my home but for the first time I see a forest indoors and they were just blown away. And thanks to that, many people came up to us, and were like, “When is the next time you are going hiking? We want to join in.” So that exhibition actually helped a lot in conveying the message that all of this will be gone if nobody does anything about it. Through photos also we tried to convey that message. We dumped 400 bags of sand into the University building (laughing)!

Following her project, Amrita went on to work for IPAC/Nishorgo in their central Dhaka office, though she emphasized (partly out of maintaining neutrality in her job) that her environmental advocacy work is somewhat separate. In fact, both Amrita and Anil expressed shyness and reservation about their work in a large, foreign-funded NGO like IPAC. They were intentionally guarded about the possibility of their efforts and talents being co-opted or steered by foreign influences. However, they viewed these

large donors as necessary, and as an element they could use strategically toward their goals. Amrita is not alone. Environmental Clubs at private universities are full of young environmentalists who share Amrita's ideas and goals about getting Bangladesh's youth to become eco-aware, responsible tourists and users of environmental resources. As Amrita describes, she felt deeply compelled to assert her abilities and optimism, partially in response to a social field which places high value on age and seniority:

Amrita: I felt like I was being pushed off a cliff, and I just had to do it. See, nobody actually pays attention to youth and what they have to do, how they have to be a part of the process.

Each year, twelve new "Earth Campaigners" are selected by the British Council to be given small amounts of funding to implement their projects. In 2010, I interviewed Earth Campaigners with projects ranging from photo-documentation of environmental refugees (from floods tied to global warming), to sustainable forestry awareness-raising among the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, to advocacy documentary film making, to climate change awareness-raising in elementary and secondary schools, to engineering of a small house made out of local materials that could float in the case of flood inundation. While the projects varied, the vast majority of the Earth Campaigners I interviewed voiced their concerns along similar lines – they care about the nation of Bangladesh, and see a culture of irresponsibility but also promise, among citizens, corporations, government, and non-government relating to environmental conservation:

Anil: If you just Google climate change and sea level rise, one of the first few things that will come up is that Bangladesh is sinking, it's going down. Everybody knows we will be inundated, coastal areas will be gone, and there will be so many refugees. So that is hyping up interest not only among donors but among the country's locals, as in if they do drown, basically, what is going to happen, who will take care of them? So I feel it is that fear that who is going to take care of all these people that is driving the government's interest, the

donor's interest to, at least do something for the country. I mean, behind every motive there has to be a selfish reason so in this case, the industries want to go green so they can attract more investors. But, whatever the case is, if it helps Bangladesh, why not? We found that people want to see a part of nature, but through many restrictions they cannot. When they were children, they saw trees, and they don't any more. And it's going to affect people. That sense that something is under threat which is an asset for Bangladesh worked a lot.

Most viewed their responsibility as using their position of education and privilege to advocate and to be role models as responsible environmental citizens, yet with an assumed kinship to all Bangladeshis. Their hope was for citizens and institutions to coalesce around maintaining "green" as a tangible and vital part of the nation.

Central to the tangibility and vitality of this asset is the idea of appreciation of the environment, in terms of its raw aesthetic qualities and its aura of authenticity:

Anil: For me, the value itself is basically – to look at a green tree and to look at a grey building, I would take the green tree any day. Because it provides more values, if not intrinsic or extrinsic just, the fact that it's alive, it's a living thing. And I can have a relationship with it in a sense. It provides benefits which are not basically tangible, but rather, emotional, psychological. I would rather go for that than live in an apartment in a pigeon-hole, and spend the rest of my life there. For me the value is that, but I don't know what it is to others.

Yet part of the process of realization of this ecological aura comes through "encounters", envisioned in this case by the encounter in an urban classroom, by hiking expeditions and outings, and by promotion of park sites like Lawachara. This is a type of tourism which diverges from more standard forms of leisure in Bangladesh like "the picnic" and "the *mela* (fair)". While both the picnic and the *mela* center on the carnivalesque, the doing of something outside the realm of everyday life, proper eco-tourism requires a further symbolic operation. It involves a voyeuristic and romantic appreciation of the aesthetic and authentic that are often right in front of you, or at least not too far away:

Anil: When students go into a room like that in a University day, it does attract them. Provided that they haven't gone anywhere but Cox's Bazaar, they have no experience with Bangladesh. Then they want to go to places in Bangladesh rather than just doing tourism in India! The irony is, if you were to ask them, where did this picture come from, they will assume the internet. When you tell them this is from nearby to Dhaka, they will go like, "That's impossible! We do not have this much biodiversity." They don't know such things exist in Bangladesh, so they prefer to go outside to see such things. I mean, you have something right in front of you, and you don't value it.

Amrita: Through this, we wanted to do something for Bangladesh, through youth, related to natural resource management. I saw how IPAC's co-management was not working the way it should have. The idea of eco-tourism, of responsible tourism, was just not happening. Because people in our country are not very much aware of how to be responsible tourists.

Their references play back and forth between a consumer with the means to travel internationally, and a more generalized Bangladeshi citizen (without this means). Their recognition of the potential gap in subjecthood between the two informs their work in bringing together "urban" (educated, affluent) and "rural" (less so) youth. This model of a responsible citizen is one that would not only appreciate nature's beauty and bounty, consuming it visually without destroying it through consuming it physically, but a citizen who would be imbued with the aura of conservation and carry it with them into their everyday lives:

Amrita: We train our own members to be eco-friendly. By the end of the year they get out as responsible citizens, as environmentally-friendly citizens.

The responsible eco-tourist, it is hoped, would carry with them an appreciation that would manifest itself in sharing their experiences with friends and family and standing up for environmental practices in their everyday lives.

Experiencing Nature to Conserve It

[T]he quest for the romantic moment, the authentic self, for nature, for romance has been elaborated by consumer culture—instead of being divorced from consumerism, the travel romance is a perfect example of it. In many ways, travel involves the commodification of landscapes to create ritual settings that allow us to act out the relationships we create. The most romantic landscape is incidentally the most expensive, at least in terms of travel costs; it is primarily ‘wild,’ that is, far away from the industrial world, and isolated, that is, uncontaminated by capital and the presence of working-class or middle-class vacationers (Illouz 1997: 100).

Many young environmental activists in Dhaka cite “experiencing” nature as fundamental to conservation efforts. They believe that many Bangladeshis have not had this experience, have not encountered nature, or at least if they have, they have not been attuned to the connections between its beauty and its conservation value. If people cannot recognize the value of the natural world right in front of them, they argue, citizens will not be motivated to conserve it for the sake of themselves and for the country.

For this reason, many activities envisioned by Earth Campaigners and undertaken by university Environmental Clubs involve this kind of awareness-raising through experiential encounter. This belief is fostered, in turn, by organizations like the British Council, IPAC, and BCAS, who sponsor and guide these young activists’ activities. As Earth Campaigners, the group was sponsored for trips to Bangladesh eco-destinations like Saint Martin’s Island and Srimongol, and several were selected for a trip to meet up with Champions from other South Asian countries in Kathmandu, Nepal. Many of the young activists cite some kind of tourism as fundamental to their experience with appreciation for nature.

Though not a huge or extremely prevalent part of Bangladesh's economy, the burgeoning eco-tourism industry, indeed, relies on many of the same assumptions as the young activists as to how nature should be experienced, and plays up what conservation may be promoted by such kinds of tourism. Companies like Guide Tours and Bangladesh Eco-Tours attempt to market this to the eco-conscious Bangladeshi consumer, resident ex-patriot, or adventure tourist:

Our tours tread softly -- respecting the environment and culture while fully enjoying the natural ambiance of this charming, undiscovered and often neglected region. We are the only eco or cultural tour group in the country.

Float down shimmering rivers in wooden country boats, trek through lush forests to discover hidden Mru villages on verdant hilltops. After lounging on palm-fringed beaches, take a quaint country launch to explore ancient Buddhist and Hindu temples on offshore islands in the Bay of Bengal. These and many more options allow you to experience a Bangladesh that few people would imagine. (Bangladesh Eco-Tours website)

This type of tourist promotion literature frequently unites imagery of Tagore's *Sonar Bengal* ("golden Bengal", art and literature celebrating the beauty of rural Bengal), an Orientalist version of exotic culture (in the form of Hindu and Buddhist temples), and colonial encounters with jungle villages. It also, like the young activists, consciously references that Bangladesh is under-appreciated for these assets both by nationals and by foreign impressions. Almost invariably, however, a typical tourist experience with one of these eco-tours involves a suggested itinerary of contact with "indigenous people":

Your homestays and lasting friendships with the local and indigenous people may be the most memorable part of your genuine eco-adventure.



Figure 14 - Photo of young Mru woman from Bangladesh Eco-Tours website

Tailor-made, personalized itineraries from two days to two weeks, chosen accommodation with local families or in quaint lodges, varied and select vegetarian cuisine, great companionship, experienced & caring guides and proven reliability are our hallmarks.

We excel, as we love and know this region well and live among its people. We wish to share with you a rare and exceptional experience that you will cherish forever. You will tour in very small groups of two to six, enough to have fun and make friends, yet small enough to be flexible and minimize impact on the traditional cultures and the environment. These are true 'community-ecotourism' and 'people meeting people' experiences.

Come and join us in a traditional dance in honor of a banana leaf delivered by a cow, with a special message from the creator to the Mru people.

Who are the consumers of these experiences? Michael, for example, an ex-patriot doctor in Bangladesh working for the British High Commission. Michael undertook one of these treading lightly expeditions of Bangladesh Eco-Tours, and described it as such, to a group of fellow foreign High Commission employees, as his wife played the role of chiding him for his recklessness. Though he had taken leave of his post in Dhaka primarily to take in some World Cup cricket matches in Chittagong town, he also undertook a two-day, overnight adventure tour in the Chittagong Hill Tracts to experience Bangladesh's indigeneity and forest space:

Oh, it was fantastic. These guys, they know how to live in the jungle! Totally primitive. The guide was hunting little rodents, and collecting forest food. They don't have the same prohibitions about food that we do, you know? We built a campfire in the jungle, and slept out there. And they were bringing us native liquor and food. Fantastic.

The "going native" experience with which Michael was regaling his guests, in its symbolic associations, rests on an entire history of colonial officers going native and experiences at once reviled and cherished in "hardship" colonial postings. Michael's arrogance and naïveté in the way he recounted the primitive ways of his hosts, it was later commented by several of his guests, almost seemed like a parody of a colonial forest

officer. Yet while on one hand, the “tread lightly” motif of eco-tourism organizations argues specifically against the reading of tourism as a destructive colonial relic and operation of power, in its promotion of exotica and “going native”, it is relying on similar tropes in order to market and produce this experience for tourists like Michael. It is partly this tension, in trying to remove “the colonial” from “the romantic” in nature appreciation that Amrita and Anil sense in their discomfort in working at IPAC. This goal is articulated in eco-tourism literature:

Get off the beaten track, interact with indigenous and tribal folk to experience and learn about their unique completely nonviolent culture and lifestyle. These are 'people-meet-people' encounters at their very best. Our tours tread softly -- respecting the environment and culture while fully enjoying the natural ambiance of this charming, undiscovered and often neglected region. (Bangladesh Eco-Tours)

In contrast to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, often one of the primary sites of “tourism of the indigenous”, or Lawachara Forest (discussed above), are other areas of Bangladesh, including parts of Sylhet, Mymensingh, and Modhupur, where tourism of the indigenous is somewhat new and often contested. I turn later in this chapter to looking at how the practice of eco-tourism of adivasi culture, lives, and communities, are often resisted by those communities themselves. Firstly, I trace some of the post-colonial history of the marketing of this kind of tourism.

Adivasis in the Nation: From Violent Relic Culture to Tourism of the Authentic

In the project of nation-building, what constitutes culture and tradition must be circumscribed and homogenized to some degree. Yet that project of homogenization and

hegemony is never fully complete or unambiguous, and states and their subjects are forced to find ways of dealing with their very own heterogeneities.

In the case of Bangladesh, the state, especially immediately post-independence in 1971 (and this has been reinforced in various nationalist movements since) has explicitly described its citizens as “Bengali” (conceived of as an “ethnicity”, and, implicitly, a group of language-speakers). This label would marginalize the diverse inhabitants of the Modhupur, parts of Sylhet and Mymensingh, and the Chittagong Hill Tracts who, by this definition, are not Bengali. Partly in response to minority demands (but also in emphasizing religion over culture) this constitutionally-embedded designation was later changed to “Bangladeshi,” defined by territorial citizenship (Karim 1998). Yet despite the broadening in conceptualization of the Bangladeshi as citizen, both (often unmarked) ethnicity and religion continue as salient markers of identity. In Bengali and in English in Bangladesh, the term “ethnic” is typically only used to describe Bangladesh’s marked non-Bengali residents.¹⁹³

Mainstream and state discourses relegating indigenous and minority communities to the margins of citizenship may seem unsurprising given the well-known homogenizing aims and tendencies of national projects. However, it should also be noted that for many adivasi groups, there was rarely a one-to-one correspondence between mainstream liberal citizenship and the actual demands of the marginalized people, as detailed in chapter 1. In

¹⁹³ Religion is commonly assumed and used as a marker of difference for indigenous communities in Bangladesh. Lamia Karim claims that, in conjunction with Islamization, the secular aspects of the constitution were downplayed, and “an ideological offensive was launched against Adivasis and other minorities” (1998, 304). It is important to keep in mind, however, that neither have secular principles effectively addressed the inclusion of the indigenous minorities of Bangladesh.

other words, what is to be done when subalterns fail to recognize the territorial state as the guarantor of their “rights”? The people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, for example, realized early on the limits of their possible ostensible “inclusion” into territorial sovereignty as citizens and, in contrast to most of the Mandi, articulated demands for varying measures of autonomy, from the colonial, Pakistani, and post-independence regimes. During the Pakistani regime, and even more strongly after Bangladesh’s independence, a forcible inclusion approach was taken by the state toward the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which led to the formation of adivasi political opposition in the form of the PCJSS party and its armed wing, the *Shanti Bahini* (Peace Army). This would eventually lead to the signing of a 1997 Peace Accord in the Hill Tracts, in which a certain measure of autonomy was granted (Mohsin 2003). The Accord was not without its critics, namely the then opposition-BNP, which at the time was alleging that “the government has ‘violated’ the unitary nature of Bangladesh, ...the special privilege granted...was seen as a violation of the Constitution because it goes against equality of opportunity of all the citizens” (Datta 2004: 112). After coming to power, the BNP agreed to uphold the treaty, but was extremely slow to implement it. Nevertheless, adivasi opposition has had important effects, which may be generally categorized as a new *type* of recognition for the state’s adivasi inhabitants, on one hand more in terms of multi-cultural inclusion, while on the other hand reliant on a primitivized rendering of indigeneity.

The purpose in revisiting this history is twofold: to illustrate that although the thrust of a completely hegemonic nationalism is to subsume its marked, minority and ethnic politics, that project is always messy and never complete; and to present the

context for a certain shift in the national discourse wrought both from within the ongoing process of minority citizenship negotiations in Bangladesh, and from increasing involvement by international NGOs and human rights organizations.

If we assume that these human rights organizations are well-meaning, they carry with them their own homogenizing tendencies, following a similar (if more “universalistic”) procedure for inclusion. As Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) notes in examining the indigenous rights discourse in Australia:

If the indigenous was unhinged from its previous social referent, it was also resituated within a complex field of national and international civil and human rights standards of acceptable and unacceptable social and cultural difference. International bodies produced protocols and held conventions outlining what practices violated human rights, gender rights, racial rights, and cultural rights. (2002: 24)

In conjunction with the influx of the U.N. and other NGO presence into the Hill Tracts after the Peace Accord, a similar shift has taken place toward a discourse recognizing the Chittagong Hill Tracts as a culturally distinct but valid zone of Bangladesh, and away from the characterization of its adivasis nation-wide as rebels, bandits, and usurpers. Following increased (though still militarized) peace in the region, and the adivasi avenues to tap into international models of indigenous identity, liberal and intellectual circles in Bangladesh have been able to incorporate adivasis discursively as an occasionally celebratory representation of diversity, timelessness, and authenticity in Bangladesh. The shift in representation of the CHT has had an impact for many other groups outside of the area, such as the Mandi of Modhupur.

While this invites neither a lauding of the Bangladeshi government in its magnanimous achievement of human dignity for adivasis in the nation, nor a claim that

the discourse of multiculturalism evidenced here is the same as or has been as central to the popular imaginary as it has in, say, the United States or Australia. The purpose in highlighting this shift is to examine how national identity is able to subsume difference by relegating it to a mode of celebration and tradition, thereby neutralizing its potential for radical identity politics. As Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) articulates, minority and native groups are often “...unhinged from the specificity of actual indigenous struggles, from their differing social agendas and visions of a reformed social world, and from the specific challenges they posed to contemporary nation-based governmentality and capital” (2002: 24). The national project tries simultaneously to incorporate and to neutralize challenges which it has not eradicated.

There are two gendered dimensions which demand attention here. One is the striking analogy between how the nationalist project articulated the dimension of gender and how it has articulated differences with its minority communities. Both women and minorities are, in varying but similar ways, articulated in the role of maintenance of tradition, and discursively relegated to outside of the sphere of politics. The second and related phenomenon is that “native” and minority populations are often portrayed and classed as feminized, represented by the adivasi woman as tradition-bearer, and connected to feminized notions of primordiality and closeness to nature.

In the case of Bangladesh, these phenomena can be examined by revisiting (from chapter 1) the English-language magazine *Bangladesh Quarterly* over the past 25 years. Published by the government’s Ministry of Information, this publication signifies how the

government elite desires to portray itself, at least to its English-speaking readership at home and abroad.

Documenting the publishing prevalence of adivasis during this period yields interesting results. There is consistently one article or prominent mention approximately every two years from 1982 until 1992. Each and every article is centered around ritual and cultural aesthetics, including dancing, ornamentation, or more general “culture,” and presents an arcane people, a curious relic, an archaeological subject of inquiry that happens to reside within the state: “It is a freak of nature that pieces of humanity separated from the rest have developed a culture and traditions of their own which is quite in tune with the surroundings they live in” (Hussain 1984: 48). Adivasis are portrayed as quaint and feminized: “Besides agriculture, these tribes also practice other crafts, such as basket-making and weaving” (Haque 1988: 54), a statement which resonates strongly with the AIG (alternative income generation) programs in detail in Chapter 4.

From 1994 until the present the prevalence increases to one or two articles per year, or almost one article per every two issues, yet still nearly every article is on cultural practices, despite important political contestations during this period. The trend of “cultural articles” continues through and beyond the 1997 Peace Accord. There is almost no mention of the political process, and even the single article on the Peace Accord itself shows only one picture of adivasi people, and it is a group of women in costume dancing in a soccer stadium. It could be argued that the reasons for keeping the volatile politics out of such a national journal are obvious, and certainly newspaper reviews of the same

period would yield a much different result, but it should also be noted that the *Quarterly* regularly contains articles on a number of political issues. Yet more important is the observation that, especially post-Accord, a shift took place in which the indigenous inhabitants of the Bangladesh begin to be presented more commonly as *part* of Bangladeshi heritage and as a glimpse of timelessness and tradition *in* Bangladesh.

One of the most common ways in which the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other forested spaces have been presented in more recent years is in the increasing promotion of Bangladesh as a national and international tourist destination.¹⁹⁴ Strikingly similar to Bangladesh Eco-Tours' present description, the *Bangladesh Quarterly* entices its readers with glowing descriptions of the wonders of the CHT in a 2005 article:

The hill districts are inhabited by a number of distinct tribes like the Chakmas, the Tripuras, the Murangs, the Marmas all preserving their age old cultures, colourful rituals, dance and music. Here the glistening greenery sits on the purple hills around lakes, manmade and natural. Rangamati town is the most favourite holiday resort in the Hill Tracts known for its winding hills and enchanting beauty as well as for its tribal life. The hanging bridge over Kaptai lake, formed by damming the mighty Karnafuly river, a Handicraft center show casing Ivory Jewelry, a Tribal Museum, fascinating water falls breaking the silence of the valley are its prime attractions (Ullah 2005: 39).

The bitter irony of the beauty of Kaptai Lake would not be lost on anyone familiar with the history of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, as this large body of water displaced nearly 100,000 people while being manmade (Mohsin 2003). Along with this gloss, celebrated are “dance and music,” performed by women and illustrated in a color picture immediately above, and the celebratory timeless designator “age old cultures” which are being preserved, as well as close associations between “tribal” life and nature. A similar

¹⁹⁴ The success of its campaigns could be seen in a 2006 *New York Times* special feature naming Bangladesh as one of *the places to go* (Koyen 2006).

tourism article from September of 2000 contains, as two of its eight illustrations, a tribal dance and a beautiful picture of Kaptai Lake (Saleh 2000: 62-5).

In the aforementioned 2005 issue, an article on the Ethnological Museum in Chittagong, which showcases “12 ethnic groups, 26 tribes and aborigines from home and abroad” with familiar cultural exhibit categories such as “Natural environment, settlement type, ornaments, home life, economic activities, dresses, food, festival, hunting sequence, handicrafts.” The museum “stands as a bridge between the past and present upholding Bangladesh’s rich tradition and culture” (Haque 2005: 76). Though reifying, it could be argued that such sites of cultural production may allow middle and upper-class Bangladeshis, as well as foreigners, to recognize and appreciate the diversity of the territorial nation-state and this particular region. This imagined possibility it shares with nature tourism as well. What I am highlighting for our purposes is the particular configuration of associations of these “tribal” people with feminized archetypes and, simultaneously, as preservers of the nation’s “tradition and culture”, a vision of the nation it also shares with nature appreciation.

It is striking that, while photographs of Bengali male politicians, businessman, and intellectuals figure prominently in the *Bangladesh Quarterly*, nearly every pictorial representation of the people of adivasis were of women (there were a total of three exceptions over twenty-five years and dozens of photographs, each of which featured men in the background as musicians). Similarly, nearly every issue contains at least one ad for tourism in Bangladesh, and invariably, that tourist appeal showcases tribal dances and the colorful costumes of adivasi people. While it could be argued that these articles

and advertisements reflect an increasing emphasis on the tourist economy or savvy marketing, more the commoditization of culture than evidence of larger national imaginaries, it should be again emphasized that the *Quarterly* covers topics of politics, economics, literature, foreign relations, health, and history, and in its mission statement “attempts to present images of current social, economic and intellectual interests in Bangladesh.” As part of that representation, “tribal” people even made the cover at one point. This issue of *Bangladesh Quarterly* was distributed with two women, colorfully dressed and holding baskets on the front. Curiously, there was not a single word on the adivasi people in this issue.

Though “Opinions expressed...do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Government,” the publication is issued by its Ministry of Information. I submit that it would be ill-informed to claim that there are not important interactions between modes of record, entertainment, and public culture and the larger national and political projects. The *Bangladesh Quarterly* exemplifies the often close interaction of gender and gendered categories with minority and “tribal” politics and their representations in national and international spheres, as well as the recent history of incorporation of tourism of the indigenous in promotion of the nation in Bangladesh. In the next section, I present the operation of “local knowledge” as key to the operation of environmentalist and indigeneity discourse in Bangladesh, before detailing local appropriation of and resistance to these forms.

Learning Local Knowledge in Development Speak

Claims about the superiority of “local knowledges” are found not only in human rights and environmental literature, but also in more recent development literature. In development-speak, referencing “local knowledge” allows development initiatives to distance themselves from the misguided programs of the past. This can be scientifically justified, as past initiatives have been poorly researched and have not taken proper account of local specificity or local “culture” in order to assure effective implementation. By contrast, newer initiatives claim to include more intense ecological, sociological, ethnological, and even ethnographic research methods. In this way, they realize more fully the prospect of a holistic implementation, while at the same time offering the tantalizing prospect of lucky finds in the mining of indigenous wisdom.

Previously, I have been detailing the value accorded to nature in environmental discourse, and associations being made between indigeneity and nature. Juxtapositions are made between technical knowledge and local knowledge, and both are accorded value through certain understandings of the environment as related to culture. Particular contradictions arise as a discourse concerned with human rights and critical of modern development paradigms privileges indigenous ways of knowing, while at the same time constructing, for the larger Bengali society, a progressive timeline in which it is “once again” lagging behind on the world stage.

Kavita Philip, in *Civilizing Natures*, describes late 19th century ethnography of South India as using “a narrative in which the capacity to labor is a crucial measure of civilization” (2006: 116). With a familiar modernist sensibility, amateur ethnographers like Lieutenant-Colonel W. E. Marshall and missionary Samuel Mateer would posit the curious complacency and laziness of the native (in this case the Toda), unable and unwilling to control and use his environment to maximum benefit. What is particularly interesting for our purposes, however, is the link Philip finds between this inability to labor and “an incapacity to appreciate nature as Western races do” (2006: 116). She describes this as resting on the logic of an assumed “high culture” of the West and its sympathizers in contrast to the low civilization of the Toda, the key symbolic distinction between the two being that in the former, the opposition between nature and culture is firmly maintained. The higher culture, then, is able to distinguish the true value of nature, which can be utilized both by laboring properly within it and by affording it its true aesthetic value, neither of which is the Toda able to appreciate (2006: 117).

This distinction between high and low culture is key to understanding the mechanisms by which various types of discourse I have been discussing resolve the contradiction between modern ways of using and appreciating the environment and the privileging of indigenous or environmental knowledge. While human rights may be an important site for the debate about what happens with the environment in Bangladesh or the indigenous groups within its borders, these structures of high and low cultures with differing levels of appreciation for the environment are instrumental.

Large development discourse, particularly that of the Asian Development Bank, commonly argues forest lands represent an under-utilized resource. Since there is a shift (assumed to be inevitable) for the (often adivasi) inhabitants away from agricultural sustenance and stability, there must be an incorporation into marketable production. Implicitly, “natives” must be taught to labor efficiently. Yet tourism is also emphasized as having great economic potential. Those (outsiders) with the means to travel can be guided through the great natural beauty that is the forest land. Thus, those with the sophistication to efficiently labor in the environment *or* to appreciate its aesthetics will guide the way with their high culture. As Anna Tsing argues it, “Both conservation and development take the importance of the proper demarcation of spheres of humans and nonhumans, culture and nature, as a given” (2005: 175).

Human rights organizations might remain skeptical about if not outright oppose eco-parks or other tourist operations which sequester or restrict indigenous groups in order to preserve aesthetics for tourists. Yet the logic is similar, even though the roles are differently assigned, and the solutions are disparate. In the writings of the Minority and Environment Group, as in the colonial, anthropological, and development models to which I have been referring, the native is still closer to nature, and does not draw the proper semantic distinction between nature and culture. However, in this “progressive” style of environmentalism, that lack of distinction is actually privileged. Those (tourists and development actors) who would maintain that barrier simply for aesthetic appreciation or labor exploitation actually become the arrogant and powerful version of low culture, while those who have learned to deprecate the nature-culture distinction are

of the high culture. While Argyrou's portrayal of this symbolic relation as the ultimate realization of modernity may be over-dramatized, I do agree that this is a particularly salient and fascinating characteristic of contemporary environmental thinking.¹⁹⁵

In highlighting the past decade or so of recourse to "local knowledges", as well as mentioning these facets of progressive environmentalist thinking and its relationship to positing an "eco-native", my purpose is not to deride local or even non-local environmentally-based contestation. Rather, like many of the streams of NGO and development rhetoric and affect I have been highlighting, both environmentalism and "local knowledge" claims are strategically appropriated and deployed by Mandis in the Modhupur area.

In the next section, I offer an example of where indigenous leadership is able to mobilize this distinction in order to stake some amount of claim to forest resources as their own, despite the Forest Department's maintenance of ambiguous land tenure for the Mandi. An as example of the recourse to indigeneity and local knowledge claims, I show ethnographically how David Simsang, General Secretary of Mandi-run advocacy organization Adivasi Upliftment Group, uses a symbolic of ties to the motherland (quite legible in nationalistic Bangladesh) to defend against Forest Department policy. Also implicit in helping his case is a recent history of contestation between Mandis and the

¹⁹⁵ Taking the "logic of environmentalism" as the fullest realization of modernity slightly obscures the historical context of modernity and the way in which it has operated, though Vassos Argyrou (2005) ably notes the tendency in "progressive" thinking toward newer and more ultimate universalisms.

Forest Department which rendered the Mandi victim and the Forest Department villain in the eyes of the national and international human rights community.

The policy which the Forest Department is attempting to enforce here involves Mandi being “granted” land and/or tree saplings with the understanding that they would get some amount of income from the eventual sale of the lumber, while the presence of the trees themselves during their life cycle would help to regenerate the forest and its wildlife. In exchange, however, the Mandi cede some amount of control over resources on what is, at least for the time being, recognized to be their land. While in the Forest Department’s view, this is a development program favorable to the Mandi, many Mandi view it as a somewhat coercive means to usurp Mandi control over their own tree and land resources.

In the following exchange, these two views come to a confrontation as Bengali “Community Forest Workers” (not forest department employees exactly, but sponsored by the forest department – introduced in Chapter 4) attempt to enforce this policy against a recipient cutting their trees before the agreed-upon time. What happens instead is that Mandi villagers reverse the apprehension, and bind up the forest guards. Then, a negotiation follows.

Addressing the Forest Department

After several missed incoming calls from the same number, David finally has to see what’s going on. After getting a quick synopsis of events transpired, he encourages the caller to try to work things out, but at their insistence, David concedes that he will go

and try to help resolve it. He hangs up the phone and says, “Well, I’ve got to go see about this situation in Bedouria – you want to go?” He laughs, half-joking, but when I eagerly agree, he notes, “Yes, this might be interesting for you to see.”

On his motorbike en route, David recounts to me what little he knows: A few Mandi men were cutting down trees which they considered to be on their land. Some “Community Forest Workers”¹⁹⁶ happened upon them, and warned the guards that the cutting of such trees on Park land was illegal, and attempted to detain the men. Instead, Mandis from neighboring homes came to the defense of the tree-cutters, and reversed the attempted apprehension, taking matters into their own hands and eventually tying up the Community Forest Workers so that the situation could be dealt with. The supervising Forest Department Beat Officer was called to the scene and began negotiating with the villagers, and the villagers called in their community leaders, who then called David as well.

As we arrive at the scene of the incident, there is a heated but organized and respectful conversation going on in the courtyard of a home, with a sizable crowd of men, Bengali and Mandi, mostly middle-aged, gathered around. We arrive on David’s motorbike, and his role as a community arbitrator is evident. My presence is noted, but not much remarked-upon; I listen in the back. A gap in the crowd quickly parts, and David steps in, listening at first, and then giving his comments. Initially, the local Beat

¹⁹⁶ A Community Forest Worker is someone who has undergone training about forest protection by the Forest Department and trainers with whom they contract, is given a modest uniform, and subsequently patrols the forest looking for illegal activity, primarily illegal tree-felling. There appear to be very few Mandi CFWs; nearly all are Bengali Muslim. There are some (10-20%) females. CFWs collect a per diem salary similar to that of an agricultural day laborer, though I am told significantly less than a day labor wage for actually assisting the tree fellers.

Officer, nervous and a bit rambling, is characterizing the situation as a misunderstanding to a respected Bedouria household head:

Beat Officer: The Community guards, they know how this works, this system. That's what we're saying. In my interior area, look, I'm the Beat Officer. I give permission; there's no second in command. There were eight trees being cut, and when I'm far away, my phone should be called. Then I would say, okay, if they are trees from your home, then give them permission. It was a misunderstanding, that's why this happened.

Young Leader: Okay. I believe you, I trust you, I was wrong, fine.

B.O.: No, but the trust! There is no trust here! Look, I have responsibility for some of the Modhupur area. So I called Midan, and Midan gave me some information. What's going on with our workers? What's happening? For ten taka? At what place? 8:00? But we aren't there. And someone is selling trees. We have had training; we are officers. You are all the people of this area—it's *your* place. These areas, the borders, the Forest Workers won't completely know. If it's natural trees, we all know. Okay, Uncle, you say it's not. This is what I think, but it's not an opinion everyone shares. So after that, we're admitting, okay, they are cultured (*palito*) trees, these trees they have. I'm thinking, go or don't go? Should I go? After that, five *bakain* trees have gone. Permission had been given. The system was working. A lot of money has been gotten from this jungle. Trees will be planted. But I don't need these trees personally, understand?

Y.L.: With your permission, I want to say something. (B.O.: Go ahead.) Before your "community workers", we have laid our mothers in the forest. (B.O.: Your "forebears"¹⁹⁷.) Yeah, I'm saying, where are my forebears? In our forest will everyone's mothers be able to stay or not? (B.O.: Of course. Yes.) Okay? Beat officer, range officer, you all need to understand this.

Beat Officer: Of course. The damage hasn't been Garos'. This forest has been damaged by us. (Y.L.: No...) It's been ours. Garos haven't destroyed the forest. We see that.

The Beat Officer asserts his authority and the source of his motivation (responsibility), but defers to the community leader, particularly when the issue of autochthony is raised. The Beat Officer is quick to point out that he agrees that "we" (though he is, in fact, newly assigned to the area, implicitly the Forest Department and Bengali Muslims in general) are responsible for the forest's destruction. Further, he notes the distinction not so much in terms of land boundaries (which are ambiguous in this area) but in terms of "natural" versus "cultured" forest. "Garos" here stands as a subcategory of

¹⁹⁷ They both use the English word "forebears" here.

“*adivasi*”/“*bonbasi*”¹⁹⁸ and means to both parties the people who are native to this area, as well as a representational form which renders the “Garó”/adivasi as not a (modern) threat to the forest. These two facets of the identity category are mutually dependent, as any ostensible damage rendered to the forest can be read as innocuous or for the greater good of nature, while any challenge to the inherent good of Garó culture can be defended in terms of autochthony. Both parties are familiar with the outlines of this form.

The conversation continues as a Mandi villager points out that people selling trees in the village cannot be equated with breaking the law for profit but tree-selling is, rather, a necessity; people sell their trees to get money to care for sick children, for example. Someone else points out that each village has a *mathbor* (village head) familiar with village boundaries and geography, and they should be overseeing these matters for their own villages instead of the Forest Department. A third person notes that the application for permission to cut trees is prohibitively expensive and time-consuming, which explains much of the non-compliance. David is then introduced by the young leader.

Young leader: Okay, our Adivasi Upliftment Chairman Sir has come, he would like to say something.

Beat Officer: How are you? I am the beat officer for this area.

David Simsang: You’re new?

B.O.: Yes, I’m new, recently arrived. Go ahead, please.

DS: We have talked about this before with the former Beat Officer. Still we have these problems. In my village, too, we have these problems. Still. This Community Forest Guard thing that’s happening—look, it’s okay. You, of course, know that forest pilfering happens. We support the actions you’ve taken against that. Forest cutting is going on. But if we want to sell from our area? We have to give a bribe or pay for an expensive application? So there is this tension. That’s why this kind of thing is happening in these villages.

¹⁹⁸ *Adivasi*: “original dweller/aboriginal”; *Bonbasi*: “forest dweller”

B.O.: Okay, I agree with you.

DS: You've also cut the road [to prevent vehicles from carrying out illegal lumber]. We don't need that. Look, for "your" trees, there are community guards, okay. Now we've had a conversation, so the process should be okay. And slowly, the forest will come up again. But in our villages and homes... Look, in the jungle there's no problem, but at our homes...

B.O.: No, no. We won't take legal action against you. At homes might be an *akashmoni* tree. A *bakain* tree. A *eucalyptus* tree. In the jungle there are exactly zero of these kinds of trees. But at your homes, when trees are cut, can you let us know?

DS: No, no one has said that. I'm discussing this practice. So, tell your community guards, the trees that were cut, this custom. This must be told to them. Can you let them know?

B.O.: I will let them know.

DS: This practice of tree-cutting everyone should know. But you're saying an application? Many haven't even seen the application, or aren't able to.

David and the young leader advocate for the community; the officer tries to understand but is also trying to enforce the bureaucracy he is in place to enforce. Although much of what David is saying has already been said, he has the weight of authority. In this case, the younger, local leader had articulated an affective argument based on ancestry, with which the officer also sympathizes. But the Forest Guard needs problem-based solutions, and again references specific tree species as permissible. David, familiar with problem-based solutions and as someone extensively literate in bureaucratic processes, is able to directly relate, and to posit the form of "the villager" (apart from himself) who is unable to navigate the Forest Department's bureaucracy, with which the Officer can sympathize. David is able to move things into the realm of "steps to resolution" in order to bring a close to the discussion. While individual and respected community leaders may be able to arbitrate a situation like this, David's status has a pan-

Modhupur, and even pan-Garo gravity that also makes resolution more possible. After 10 more minutes or so, the Beat Officer announces the conclusion to the crowd:

Listen, everyone! Now we've talked. We've seen what the mistake was. After this, an official at the office will see whether the trees can be taken or not. We're leaving. With regard to the matter of cutting trees from homes, a determination will be made. We are saying that for each house's situation, they will get permission. We will take these trees for now and let you know whether this kind of process will continue or not. Mulo-bhai is our project officer here, so please check with him in the future. We are forgetting everything, for the good of the area. Okay? But we are all brothers, I think. Fighting should come to an end.

The immediate resolution is that the Forest Department will keep the trees until higher-ups can resolve the scenario, but no arrests or punishments will be meted out. The questions raised by this incident will be ostensibly further considered, but similar situations have arisen in the past. Much of the "system" and "process" are up to the discretion of the current, and typically quite temporary, Forest Department Officers. Turnover among Forest Officers is high by rotation policy throughout the country, and Modhupur in particular is a "hardship post" which helps to render Officer tenure even shorter. David alludes to this problem with a hint of sarcasm as he reminds the Beat Officer that he is new immediately upon introduction.

The crowd of men retreats from the courtyard to the large tea stall installation (an open tin roof structure with a hardened-mud floor covering the *chula* (clay wood-fired stove), vending tables, and three wooden benches, and three more wooden benches and a few wooden chairs in an open-air space) adjacent to it. Most seem somewhat relieved at the resolution and the occasion for a cup of tea and a more casual conversation. Immediately recognizable waiting at the tea stall is Ufol Nokrek, wheelchair-bound since the 2004 shooting of eco-park protestors that paralyzed him and killed his friend Piren

Snal. Ufol is often warmly welcomed, and a Modhupur Mandi community hero. I recognize a few familiar faces, people I have met in passing previously, and sit down for some tea and conversation.

Reflecting on the situation, the older gentleman next to me goes on at length about the way Bengali Muslims (*mussolman*) and Muslims in general (*bidesi mussolman*: “foreign Muslims”) invade and take over wherever they can. In this context, he is referring to the influx of Bengali immigrants to Modhupur which heralded a demographic shift of around 90% Mandi majority to 45% Mandi minority in just a few decades. He uses the words “*Bangal*” (“Bengali”, pejorative in this case) and “*mussolman*” (“Muslim”) interchangeably, as implied derogatory generalizations about who he perceives as the invaders. Though I don’t assent to this characterization, he looks for my comradeship in religion and finds it in Christianity, but is again disappointed and a little suspicious when I tell him my family’s background is protestant and not Catholic, as his. He looks at his friends who I had known previously, and they mutter that it’s okay, that I’m a good guy and we’re all Christian after all. Missionary history in this area renders Christianity as a commonly assumed marker of affinity between white European foreigners and Mandis, myself included, though some amount of suspicion is leveled against those of other denominations (primarily Catholic, Church of Bangladesh, and Baptist).

For most, the situation has started to diffuse, but a few friends of the reverse-apprehended forest guards return with their friends on motorbikes, revving engines and generally looking angry and intimidating. As I chat with a few men about my research,

another argument erupts between one of the community forest guards who had been tied up and a Forest Department official. His fury represents the anger of his fellow forest guards, who find it incredibly unjust that the villagers who tied them up are seeing no repercussions. “We are trying to do our jobs,” he screams, “and we get tied up for it?!” At one point, the forest guard charges to the back of the tea stall and grabs a large stick of firewood, wielding it as a *lathi* (“stick weapon”) menacingly. Instantly the crowd surges together, both verbally and physically, with the common intent of diffusing him and keeping things peaceful; even his friends do not back him in this action. He is swiftly disarmed but not calmed. I feel Utfol’s presence to the side in his wheelchair as a reminder of the results of violent escalation of conflict between the local community and the Forest Department in the past.

On the way back, David stops his motorcycle for a minute to get a “snap” (a photograph) of the recently-dug trench in the road. He worries that while these periodic trenches have been dug on roads which are particularly used for illegal logging, they have the further effect of preventing ambulances and any other full-sized vehicle from getting through. They certainly would prevent something in the small pick-up truck category, but I wonder to myself whether the gigantic wheels of a full-size Tata shipping truck would be able to plow right over such a comparatively small embankment. In any case, motorbikes and *rickshaw van* (three wheeled cycle with a wooden platform bed, the primary mode of transportation of people and goods in much of rural Bangladesh) can bypass them on the side. For David and many villagers, however, they represent a symbolic imposition by the Forest Department.

We stop for tea twice on the way back, as David cements ties of family and friendship, which also serve a political function of maintaining support for his tenure.

David's argument to the Beat Officer was pragmatic, but it also rested on terms with which the Officer was familiar and which come both from a history of exception for indigenous peoples' land claims and from unspoken affects of indigeneity which come from a history of human rights-based resistance. While neither of these discourses were particularly effective in the case of the most drastic state action to displace indigenous people in Bangladesh, the construction of the Kaptai Dam near Rangamati in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, customary land rights and ambiguous tenure have not always functioned to adivasi disadvantage. In the above-mentioned incident, the Forest Department has the sanctioning of state authority, but is not able to clearly delineate a legal distinction between legal and illegal tree felling, and in any case is limited on the ground by what the local community will permit.

The young leader's argument that ancestry should be recognized (rather than legal title) in the delimitation of this problem is particularly instructive in this regard. And this argument, as well as human rights and environmental discourse, have been effectively leveled against the "social forestry" (tree plantation development) of the recent generation of development priorities. Even the Forest Department concedes its wrong-headed complicity in this destruction.

I want to offer that the terms and politics set here, though they are closely related to, even dependent to some degree on the terms of, and much bolstered by, the terms of

the human rights and environmental discourses, still offer a radical potential. The arguments presented here appeal not only to a modern instrumentality regarding forest resource use, nor necessarily on a teleology which presents liberation of an abject and premodern people (Ghosh 2010), but has successfully problematized the logic of a developmentalist state.

To emphasize my argument, I will now give the most prominent recent example of Mandi resistance to state eco-development projects, the protests over the construction of a wall in the Modhupur Forest delineating the boundary of an “eco park” (officially named the Modhupur National Park Development Project). The protests were encouraged by internationally-connected non-governmental organizations like Minority and Environment Group and Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers’ Association, and gained much more notoriety when, at one of the protests, Mandi activist Piren Snal was shot and killed, and another, Ufol Nokrek (mentioned above) debilitatingly wounded by police. After the shooting, construction of the wall was brought to a halt. While such clashes between local adivasis and government forces have been far more common in Bangladesh’s border areas (particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts), such a clash not so far outside of the capital city of Dhaka was a remarkable event.

Resistance: The Eco-Park Wall

David Simsang, chairman of Adivasi Upliftment Group, and I are having a long conversation about how he sees the current social climate in Modhupur, and his organization's role in it. Inevitably, the talk shifts toward the resistance to the Eco-Park Wall (officially known as the National Park Development Project) in which AUG was front and center. David identifies with the goal of "protecting the forest...for the nation and for the climate", a widespread vision I have been detailing, but sees eco-tourism as a misguided end. After all, the forest here has grown small, and the Mandi want their "privacy" (English word). In discussing eco-tourism, however, David displays some ambiguity in delineating the characteristics of the problematic tourist population. The current tourists who come (and he does not want to encourage any more), he first describes as "*malik* (landlord, land-owners, owners), the rich people", implying that those who have the money to recreationally visit have no sympathy for the rural population or its concerns or economic interests in the forest. If lodging is built to facilitate their visits (there are currently only day-use cabins), the place will be turned into a veritable amusement park of Garo villages, he is sure.

Yet David also terms the visitors unsophisticated; describing, "These illiterate people are not gentle...and mostly, they are of a conservative mentality." He chides the picnickers' use of the "mic", the rudimentary loudspeaker system that is a pervasive symbol of tasteless invasion of bourgeois respectable quiet space, which in this case is rendered in the language of protection of wildlife and the tranquility of nature. (This is referenced earlier in this chapter as part of the language of eco-tourism.) Here, David

subtly reveals the way the indigenous educated class is able to alternately deploy a language describing its own subjection and language describing its position of education and sophistication relative to the Bengali masses. Used strategically, this can be quite an effective mechanism in navigating the pitfalls and challenges of extreme minority status in a setting of lionized Bengali majority ethno-linguistic nationalism.

For David, these rich but unenlightened Bengalis “don’t have free access between men and women, boys and girls. And when they are looking, if Mandi girls are walking freely, they will be interested.” The implied male protection of female sexuality against the predatory Muslim other is a persistent theme in adivasi fears about outside encroachment, surfacing in debate about tourism in adivasi spaces as well as the dangers of Mandi women working in urban areas like Dhaka. While racial and ethnic fears of protecting female members against the others’ predatory sexuality in defense of community honor has near-worldwide valence, in Bangladesh in particular its salience is extremely prominent in colonial discourses, the inter-religious violence of Partition, the Bengali Liberation War against the Pakistan Army, and the protracted conflict between the Bangladesh Army and adivasi liberation groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). While violence has drastically reduced in the CHT since the 1997 Peace Accords, the CHT remains a heavily militarized area, and presently, the link between militarization and tourism is a crucial one, as many “tourists” in the CHT are in fact, military personnel on “rest & relaxation” time. Modhupur is not nearly as militarized as the CHT, nor does it have as strong a military-tourism link, but military stationed at the air force firing range in Modhupur often visit local tourist facilities and Mandi festivals.

Somewhat paradoxical here is the fear, on one hand, of the objectification of Mandi culture and Mandi women, and the participation of Indigenous Peoples' Organizations in that process. In a sense, what David and other IPOs, as well as even Bengali-run larger human rights and environmental NGOs who work with indigenous concerns are looking for are ways to represent and to some degree to essentialize on their own terms. This has a significant material benefit – absent the copyright-ing of culture, these NGOs have a lot of incentive to be recognized as a legitimate and authentic form of representation. But the IPOs, especially those at the local level, have also become incredibly politically important. For somewhat acephalous groups, the centering of Mandi concerns on just a few individuals means a contested position (AUG and Tribal Welfare Association elections are contentious and vital).

The importance of AUG in the Modhupur area is made evident and reinforced in the somewhat legendary status of its founder, Poresh Chondro Mree. The anniversary of Poresh's death is celebrated each year at a rather large event (not something most descendants can afford for their respected ancestors), which is co-managed by Poresh's family and AUG itself. Further, the status of Poresh is emphasized in nearly every account as the "Garo Raja", always said a bit tongue and cheek, as "there is no such thing as a Garo king", but "even Sheikh Mujib himself met with him and called him that". This was an account I heard many times, and some emphasized that it was Bangabandhu himself ("friend of Bangla, Sheikh Mujib-ur Rahman) who honored Poresh with that title, thus legitimating his leadership with reference to one of the most revered figures of Bangladesh's history.

Whereas Partha Mrong, slightly older than David and having stepped down to assistant secretary years ago, focuses on the everyday violence maintained by the presence of the air force training ground and the presence of soldiers in the area, as well as the police department, David articulates sympathy in relation to Forest Department staff and military in the area, who feel lonely in a “remote” area stationed far from home. He understands their curiosity at Garo culture (as opposed to the gawker tourists), and welcomes them at community events like Wangala festivals.

Both Partha and David refer to the Forest Department, however, as opportunistic, in the negative sense of that designation, taking advantage of and benefitting from ambiguities over land tenure and rights to the produce of the forest. Certain organizations warrant their intense suspicion, particularly IPAC, the Forest Department, and even small players like Asif Uddin and his organization, MACC, while they themselves laugh sadly at the conspiracy theories hoisted upon their organizations by others (elaborated upon in the next chapter as the “climate of suspicion”). David, however, generally refers to the large human rights and environmental NGOs who occasion the area as helpful in navigating the law and planning effective strategies to resist displacement by the government. This was a relatively consistent theme in conversations about human rights and environmental NGOs – that they are welcome and helpful in these scenarios.

If we look at these NGOs (SEHD, Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers’ Association, and others) in the work that they accomplish in concrete terms as well as their welcome reception by host communities, it helps to avoid the frequent agency-

bludgeoning effect of over-application of post-structural critiques of development (see Everett 1997). Sometimes these classed interests (in the IPO-NGO nexus) conflict with those of the subaltern indigenous, but in general, the work being done by IPOs (advocacy and public representation) and larger national human rights NGOs is far from hegemonic in its effect on villagers' everyday lives in Modhupur. We need to recognize the strategic ways in which indigenous, religious, and even primitive identities are being deployed smartly and strategically by interlocutors such as AUG, and at the same time question the extent to which these discourses have actually limited indigenous people, particularly the subaltern. As such, it is important to distinguish the limitations of indigeneity at the conceptual and discursive level from their effects when manifested in a particular locale, between forest department, local officials, NGOs, and villagers.

Internal disagreements include those between Mandis who are embracing Christianity and "modern" ways of doing things, and on the other hand those whose politics are set against this. This is not to say that there is not a gray area, which is where most Mandis would find themselves, recognizing both positive and negative effects of change and of tradition and all the *mélanges* in-between. But what is important about the indigeneity model relied upon by many NGOs is that, in a symbolic sense, it is threatened by the modern indigenous, including the practices of tree-felling, selling of Mandi land, and rejection of Sangsarek (Mandi spiritual) practices as archaic.

In this section, I briefly detail the destruction of the Eco-Park Wall, offering David and Partha's narratives of the wall incident particularly as exemplary of the

problem of an abject *the people*. I employ Kaushik Ghosh's insight that indigenous politics, and even scholarship thereof, often cannot escape the rendering of such a "people" on a timeline toward a progressive liberation (2010). What is crucial here is that the leadership is not part of this "people" and that it is an example of this liberation via a human rights structuring of interpretation. At the same time, I argue that this incident successfully problematizes the modernizing state – the logic of creating a walled-off eco-enclave, for protection of threatened species, protection of the forest from "abuse" by those utilizing its resources, or for tourism, was successfully resisted by a "political society" (Chatterjee 2004) action by these villagers. David, in his position as a "civil society" actor, must in turn disavow any kind of violent or illiberal action on the part of the villagers, even as they are successfully martyred for the cause.

David: [The human rights organizations] gave us some suggestions, like you should not do this or that, that kind of thing. They make suggestions, and we lead our people. We told *them* that day [January 3rd, 2004] that they shouldn't destroy anything. But when *the people*, especially the young people, went to make a demonstration, some of *them* did destroy things. We were against this tactic, always telling *them* not to burn cars, break shops, or beat anyone. We told *them* to demonstrate legally and peacefully. Then government cannot do anything. But it happened...

As when mediating the conflict in the village (earlier in this chapter), David distances himself from "them", the proverbial "the people," "the villagers". By doing so, he is abdicating responsibility for their (base) actions, even though his and my sympathy with those actions are implicit, and his organization was critically involved in the opposition to the Eco-Park. But perhaps more importantly, he is reflecting the social distance he, as someone who was educated in Dhaka and had the means to do so, feels between himself and the "common folk". While in a public forum, "we the Garo indigenous" is common,

in private, he rarely uses the plural first-person “we” to refer to more than just himself and other prominent leaders:

The Forest Department did not deny that they were building a wall, and we spoke out against it in a press conference. We asked, “What is the purpose of the wall?” Then, *the people* demonstrated in the forest several times, and broke parts of the wall. And in the end, Piren Snal was dead.

Next, David ascribes intentionality to the government:

It was a government plan, of the Forest Department and the Police Department. They planned that today, somehow, we should kill some people; otherwise, they will not stop the demonstration. We suspected that a leader might be killed. We encouraged people, telling them “If you want to establish your rights here, then you have to protest.” But do not break the wall.

That day, the 3rd of January, *we* did not go to that rally or protest. Front line leaders, like Partha and myself or Albert Mankin or Babu did not participate in that demonstration in the forest. And that day, they really fired. And Piren Snal was...dead.

Piren Snal was of “the people”, however:

... [Piren] was not a leader, but actually a supporter of the villagers. Of the people.

...Our second-line leader was in the front with the banner. Fortunately, actually we informed and suggested to them, you should not destroy the wall. They went to Jalabada village.

Jalabada is where the small monument to Piren Snal was made. Yeah, then, they went to the labor site, of those who were constructing the wall. They had made a small site in the village. The people that were marching, they went to destroy the labor site, and then the second-line leaders said that you should not do that. Just peacefully demonstrate in front of where they are making the wall.

And then, the people, the villagers, just went past the leaders and in front of the police. The leaders were in the back, and the people were in the front, and suddenly—they fired. And Piren Snal...

Actually, second-line leaders were killed that day. Then, I don’t know, the people were peacefully demonstrating, but the plan was to break the wall. And when Piren Snal was killed, then they destroyed every part of the wall. Completely.

Then, they surrounded the police and the forest department. The people cut trees and barricaded them on both sides. Then, the D.C. (District Commissioner) came with the Reserve Police, and said over a loudspeaker, “Please, cool down, we won’t make any more problems, we just want to rescue the people. We will punish those who fired.” And the people calmed down. And then the Forest Department and police were rescued from the forest, by the reserve police and DC. At that time, the DC was a female, really a very good person. And when they spoke in the meeting, even in Dhaka, in the ministry, she spoke in favor of indigenous people. She was good. But at that time the DFO (District Forest Officer) was very arrogant. Even he charged. The DFO was a very...[he trails off and leaves the statement unfinished]

Finally, neither department took any responsibility. Police, technically, this is their duty. The forest department’s duty is to protect the forests. We are helping you; you should take responsibility. Why wouldn’t the police department take responsibility for that? For Piren Snal, you should take responsibility. And they filed a case against the Forest Department. And then, there were arms, all arms were seized by the government.

I mean, they just had local sticks, *lathis*, a *dao*, a shovel, or such kinds of simple weapons. They didn’t have any arms. Sometimes they might use a rubber slingshot.

And sometimes the [Garo villagers] use arms, but normally no guns. Local people, our people have some guns, but they did not have licensed guns. Though there were so many in the forest guard. Because a long time ago there were tigers. For security reasons, the government gave our people guns, licensed guns. Nowadays, many of those guns are in government stores because the owners of the guns have grown old or died and the next generation is not able financially to maintain them.

The construction stopped. They wanted to establish it again, but after Piren Snal was killed, they totally stopped. Again they wanted to establish it somewhere, but denied it, and we suggested to them that they shouldn't. Otherwise, it would be another disaster.

David blames the Forest Department and Police Department as institutions, but also is careful to note that there are sympathetic, cooperative people within those organizations.

What goes on here is partially symptomatic of broader systemic and conceptual issues regarding adivasi land tenure and legal status (the “there are no indigenous people in Bangladesh” official line, and repeated refusal by the government to officially demarcate land in the Modhupur forest area), but it is also heavily dependent on those in current tenure at the local forest department offices and local politicians. For this reason, the turnover among forest department is problematic, including the lack of time to develop relationships and solutions with forest Officers, and the ability of incoming Officers to place blame for shortcomings on their predecessors.¹⁹⁹

The legacy of the killing of Piren Snal and the wounding of Utfol wounding is multi-fold. On one hand, the villagers were completely disarmed and organizations like AUG came under more severe scrutiny from government. On the other hand, Piren's killing brought a short but strong burst of attention to the problem, the end of the construction of the unpopular wall, and increased introspection on behalf of the authorities as to what the Mandi of Modhupur were capable of. That is, via their own

¹⁹⁹ Detail the speech I recorded of the District Officer who came to Modhupur and dramatically and effectively decried the practices of his predecessor, promised change, and will likely not be seen again.

leadership (primarily, but not exclusively AUG) as well as support from an activist NGO community with national and, in some cases international reach, and the broader human rights community supported by foreign embassies, they were able to resist, and when attacked, serve as martyrs (a very strong cultural symbol in Bangladesh) to their cause and against the Forest Department. AUG was then able to leverage its position and to prevent the Forest Department from restarting construction even when they thought it had blown over. This was not the final instance of intimidation and direct state violence against the Mandi community, but it was not until Bangladesh's "declaration of emergency" that such things would happen again, three years later with the vividly remembered killing and torture of the Mandi labor organizer Cholesh Ritchil. The story of the Eco-Park Wall stands as a successful resistance, the killing of Cholesh Ritchil as a rather-forgotten legacy of the "caretaker government" period, but Utfol's wheelchair and the jet and bomb noises which constantly interrupted my conversations with David and Partha remain a constant reminder of the everyday presence of both tangible and implicit violence in Bangladesh's forest spaces.

David, Partha, and the eco-park movement reflect an approach which, to some degree, relies on the nationally and internationally-connected NGO and human rights community. However, they emphasize their selectivity in dealing with these organizations. Where it works for them in their goals, they appropriate and deploy what will be useful in, for example, prohibiting the forest department from constructing a barricade wall through the middle of the forest. In doing so, however, part of the bargain

is their participation in a certain marketing of their ethnicity. Well aware, as detailed in Chapter 3, of the potential charge of inauthenticity, and sometimes using that language themselves, they nonetheless see the positives in such a dynamic as outweighing the negatives. What they tend not to lend much credence to are development programs and development operations. Rather, they view their situation as one of symbolic defense of cultural rights and pragmatic defense of land.

In contrast to David is the up-and-coming leadership of someone like William Duzzel. His critiques of Wangala and other cultural festivals run deeper into pragmatics, and he is largely dismissive of the kinds of gestures of cultural-rights-based contestation he views as vacuous and unhelpful. For William, “the modern” in terms of education, small-scale capitalist production, defense of land by maintaining legal title, and even the Christian religion, are the desirable Mandi futures he envisions. With this vision, he won election as new secretary of the AUG on that basis, just at the close of my fieldwork in Modhupur.

The Agricultural Fair – Indigeneity Re-Realized as Eco-Capital

Completely organic agriculture. We support farmers to grow aloe vera. It has a great demand on the local market. Small-scale. Because actually I think it is used (whispering) as a sex drug. It promotes sexual stability. And Bangladesh is a good place to grow aloe vera. If they are doing large-scale, we try to support the supply chain to the big market. But it's not the Bengalis, but the Mandis who are growing it. It's the adivasis, the indigenous people. Because they have some interest, some knowledge about natural healing, organic medicine. – Sharif Ahmed, agricultural specialist of Environmental Biodiversity Society (EBS)

This was a common sentiment among folks involved with the medicinal plant industry. That Bangladesh's climate is well-suited to growing aloe vera is verifiable, as

long as the cultivation is done properly. But that an “*adivasi*” or “indigenous person” to this area would have a special knowledge of the cultivation of aloe vera patently does not make sense. There may be some familiarity among the Garo with this type of horticulture as opposed to mechanized agriculture. But Sharif’s statement and many others like it I encountered are not based on the natural botany of the area, nor are they based in any measure on cultural familiarity about those about whom they speak.

Instead, the association is a symbolic one, is based on taken-for-granted symbolic associations which classify people into varying states of “natural-ness”. This state has a complex lineage in South Asia, consisting of distinctions between “*gram*” (village, civilization) and “*bon*” (forest, wild) (van Schendel 1994), (and today I would add “*sohor*” (city)), the colonial encounter, the coming of the modern era and early 20th-century Bengali literary Romantic depictions of rural nature, and more recent politics of development modernity, and the adivasi problem within that. The modernity aspect of this symbolism is constitutive of an endless search for both an “other” and a counter-balance of authenticity, a nominal quest against the constant influx of new technologies and modern ways of life which often involves the search for “the natural”.

I conclude this chapter and lead into the next with a vignette which references the ways in which many of the themes referenced in this dissertation come together. In the below account, representation of the Mandi in terms recognizable to an expectation of indigenous primitiveness come together with international ideas about how to preserve forest resources via indigenous people. The Non-governmental organization (MEG) becomes the site of a strategic alignment with a journalist from an international fashion

magazine. The high culture of concern for the environment and poor people in parts of the world imagined as “backwater” unites with a similar impulse locally – the development strategy of re-orienting “forest people” from dependence on scarce forest resources toward a more *productive* and less *destructive* livelihood, while at the same time referencing a vague sense of environmental-friendliness in which medicinal plants are an unproblematic “indigenous knowledge source” and a sustainable means of agriculture. The irony that becomes apparent is that the chain ends up being one of “environmentalist”-destined money providing a cheap source of labor and product to an environmentally-destructive pharmaceutical industry.

Before delving into that chain of symbolics, I will first introduce the Mandi in the way in which they were introduced to the foreign journalist who orchestrated it, which became the way in which they were introduced to Marie Claire magazine, its readership, and fashion mogul Abigail Haworth.

My Mom and I Share the Same Husband

“My Mom and I Share the Same Husband: A mother and daughter having sex with the same man may sound hard to believe, but it’s a necessity for one Bangladeshi tribe. Not that they’re thrilled about it.” – Marie Claire article headline, August 12, 2011

The above title and sub-heading are designed to capture the attention of a Western female readership. Along with Marie Claire readers, anthropologists have long been fascinated by similar themes, deeply exploring incest taboos and seemingly exotic and all-important kinship relations. Of the handful of anthropologists who have studied the

Mandi in Bangladesh, the most well-known, Robbins Burling, was initially attracted to the Garo due to their “fascinating, and in some ways unique, system of kinship” (Burling 1997: preface). Functioning somewhat similarly to Malinowski’s classic title, “The Sexual Life of Savages,” the headline “A mother and daughter having sex with the same man...” and buttressed at the end by the word “tribe” plays on the fantasy that in some parts of the world and in some times sexual prohibitions are or have been far lesser. These fit coherently with sensibilities about over-sexed tribal men, exotic but available tribal women, and the sensuality of a simpler and more natural lifestyle. At the same time, these fantasies are experienced at some distance, via literature, anthropology, tourism, or at perhaps the most intimate level, “playing Indian” (Strong 1998) for a time. These psycho-sexual attraction-repulsion mechanisms toward the primitive other are an important facet of the ways in which indigeneity functions in many parts of the world.

The ensuing article contains some typical and questionable assumptions. For example, those assumptions which reveal its reliance on the tribal theme for enunciation. The description of the Mandi as a “tribal” society indicates that they are living outside of the Bangladeshi state, which they are certainly not, and conjures up a host of associations of what tribal religion and culture characterize, including a heavy dose of “the primitive”. While this inaccuracy is partly due to a basic process of translation – what “tribal” means in South Asia is not understood by a typical Westerner or Western journalist – this image of priority (to modernity and modern states), isolation, and primitiveness are what make the article’s tone function in the first place. Within the span of one paragraph, Haworth

reports the location as “north-central Bangladesh,” and then goes on to describe “the Mandi” as a “remote hill tribe”. The irony is that Modhupur, indeed in north-central Bangladesh, where she was conducting the interview, is neither remote (being located along a main highway connecting the 12 million-person capital metro area with the city of Tangail) nor hilly (rising, at most, 1 to 2 meters above the surrounding plains). In fact, its close proximity to the capital city of Dhaka was what allowed Haworth to visit the place in the span of a visit to Bangladesh which only lasted a few days, and its proximity to Dhaka is one of the primary reasons Modhupur is often the subject of intense “tribal development”, environmental, and human rights interventions in the first place. These inaccuracies show the way in which “remote hill tribe” functions not as a factual descriptor, but as a referent to a set of images of what such people might *feel* like, look like, or even smell like, as they persist in perceived severe limitations on female freedom of choice to the extent of implicitly incestual taboo relations.

The brief article, despite these flaws, manages to be sympathetic. Haworth’s work and the tone of Marie Claire magazine tend toward a cosmopolitan “feminism”. In this case, the resonance is with an appeal to seeking global sisterhood and a unity with those it sees dispossessed by relic gender disparities. The article does not condescend, however, and does offer the perspectives of its subjects, even if those are selected somewhat to the author’s preconceived notion of what the politics should be in this case.

Haworth’s primary “fixer”, the expert local who facilitated her travel, access, and translations, was James and the Minority and Environment Group (MEG). I know this because I briefly met Haworth on her way out of the MEG office and to the airport,

where I offered some advice to her grumpy male assistant on what permissions and exit fees might be expected for leaving the country. MEG disappears from the text of the article. However, another voice comes to the fore, which is that of Shulekha Mrong and the organization she heads, Achik Michik, a group of female Mandi leaders. Since Achik Michik's inception as the female counterpart to AUG, Shulekha Mrong has become quite prominent as a representative of the Mandi in human rights circles.

Shulekha is quoted as saying, "The custom is a great injustice against young girls...They're denied choice, and it's psychologically damaging to share a husband with their own mother." The article acknowledges the logic behind such a cultural practice: to safeguard the matrilineage and its property, issues of kinship and clanship. Then, it brings in Shulekha as a voice who "understands such clan issues," yet opposes them. Shulekha's voice, as she presents it publicly, as translated to Haworth, and as interpreted by Haworth and put on the page, reinforces quite well the values we can imagine in Haworth, the magazine, and the readership. That is, such an arrangement is a violation of "justice" and a violation of incest taboos and results in psychological trauma. Central to this is a notion of individualized choice as paramount, which is reinforced several times in this short article – Shulekha affirms that "Mandi girls want to have genuine love relationships these days," and her colleague Parvin wants her daughter "to decide who and when she marries".

The article provides its reader what they are looking for—an affirmation of a particular kind of feminism and a feeling of imagined sisterhood with and concern for

those women still in the “tribal” areas of the world trying to modernize. However, it also educates to some degree, for example, offering to the reader the notion that despite the salaciousness in presentation, unfamiliar kinship arrangements such as polygamy can be understood partially in terms of economics: “Most marital practices around the world that involve multiple spouses have more to do with power and economics than sex, and the Mandi tribe is no exception,” and gives a little detail as to how this holds true for the Mandi.

What the article also does well is it highlights divergence in viewpoints among the Modhupur Mandi, a particular challenge when rendering “a people” to unfamiliar readers, and even more so when rendering a people typically imagined as tribal, and often assumed to be static. The Mandi do wrestle with questions of how to “modernize”, to conform to broader societal, national, or even global expectations, expectations of the relatively new religion of Christianity, while at the same time preserving Mandi sense of unity. These debates are not simply in the symbolic realms of modernity versus tradition, however. Making these debates even more pressing and vital is the perception that how they shake down could have serious impacts on Mandi economic life, and not just now, but in the future. Kinship practices are intimately linked to property rights and recent shifts in the rights and privileges of kin mean that large Mandi landholdings may become increasingly divided. This division of landholdings then could render the threat of Bengali incursion onto those lands far easier.

Intimately coupled with both of these strongly gendered dimensions, the debates on landholdings and the debates on kinship practices, is the phenomenon of labor

migration, particularly female labor migration. So strongly are they linked that either Shulekha the local female leader and NGO director, Abigail the journalist, their translator, or a combination thereof directly link the “psychologically damaging” sexual practices to anxieties over female labor migration. According to Haworth, Shulekha “cites recent cases where young women have bolted from such arrangements, fleeing to Dhaka to work as maids or beauticians.” While the “fleeing” to Dhaka for work for young Garo women rarely has anything to do with being forced to marry one’s mother’s husband, that they are linked in this recounting of events shows the strong interrelationship between anxieties about this contemporary labor arrangement with anxieties about modernizing kinship practices.

Nonetheless, what the implications of the Mandi female labor problem’s link to mother-daughter marriage provide is a recognizable positivist pragmatics of problem and solution. This also contains an imagined future of realization, from the abject primitive to the modern citizen (Ghosh 2010). In the next section, I detail Haworth’s project of activist development intended to help provide the type of alternate income source which might allow Mandi women the choice *not* to go to Dhaka to enter potentially exploitative labor relations. In turn, this project aims to protect the forest and forest people.

Empowering Fashionistas: Saving the Garo Women, One T-Shirt Dress at a Time



Figure 15 - Orola and Mittamoni Dalbot with their Husband Noten, from Marie Claire

Following Abigail Haworth's visit to Modhupur, Bangladesh, her employer, Marie Claire teamed with high-profile English designer Dame Vivienne Westwood, in Westwood's advocacy for rainforest protection and against climate change. Through an organic cotton label called People Tree and manufactured by Assisi in

India, they put out a limited-edition t-shirt dress designed by Vivienne Westwood herself, and "screen printed by hand". Across the bottom, in a childlike font, is the slogan "An acorn is happy to become an oak tree," with the words "TREES SAVE LIVES" written in black across a red and white bulls-eye, the break of color punctuating the otherwise black and white dress. The rest of the dress is a collage of outlines of cave-painting imagery, and the bottom is cut with "a Wilma Flinstone-esque hem" (Chua 2011).



Figure 16 - Westwood's t-shirt dress

On the website is a link to a video about the project. The video is on the set of the fashion shoot for the rainforest-supporting dress, in a sprawling London loft space. A haunting, Nutcracker-esque orchestration plays with slow-motion video of lipstick being applied and Westwood laughing. There are periodic close-ups of badges which read “Act Fast, Slow Down – Climate Change”. In the middle of the video is Dame Westwood explaining her vision to the somewhat disinterested model of the t-shirt dress:



Figure 17 - Lady Gaga and a model both sporting Westwood's Climate Revolution attire

I wanted to try to do a television program, and the main part of this television program is, 'What can one person do?' It would concentrate on the rainforest, and it would be a chat show with experts and the public, and I would be the host of it. The whole point of this program is to find a solution with the people from the bottom up and say, 'This is what has to be done, this is the best thing to be done.' That's what I wanted to try and do, but I don't know the answer yet, you see? ...And it's mad! I don't know where peoples' imagination is, why don't they care about it?

What Dame Westwood's dress plays on – “playing Indian” (P. Strong) as a nod to earth-people – works because of the interconnected webs of significance which symbolically link the liberal-“radical” sentiments of elite whites with corners of the globe that fall on the front lines of environmental contestation. It is at once a radical gesture in

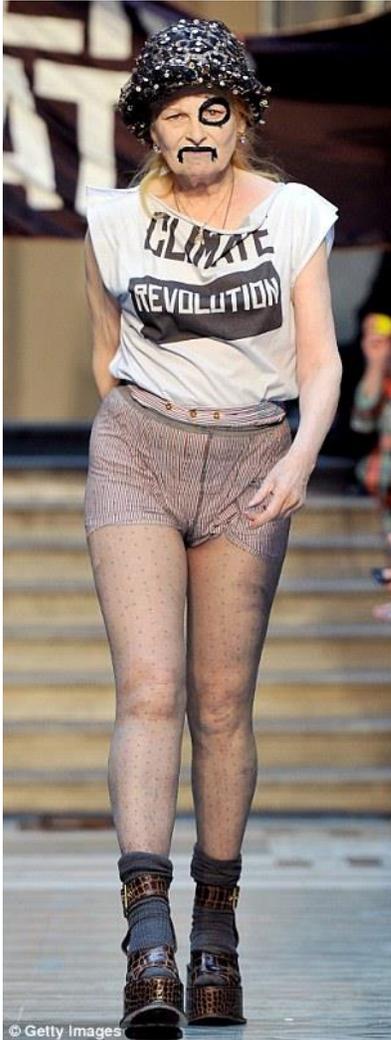


Figure 18 - Vivienne Westwood

her world and a universalizing gesture in *the* world. I read this not as a mockable parody but as the kinds of symbolics at play in NGO and environmentalist politics writ large into a strange linkage.

Westwood's campaign has been an initiative against deforestation, to save rainforests, and to combat climate change. The proceeds from the sale of the t-shirt dress go to Minority and Environment Group, a link made via Abigail Haworth, author of "My Mom and I Share the Same Husband". MEG served as her facilitator in writing the article, her "fixer" for her trip to Modhupur. While MEG has a number of different projects, primarily volumes and periodical publications on various human rights and environmental issues, these proceeds are specifically to benefit "the Garo women of Bangladesh, whose lives

and livelihoods have been endangered by deforestation" (PeopleTree website). In particular, the way in which these funds are used is for MEG's "ecological farming" initiative. In reality, what this involves is training Garo women to farm chiretta, holy basil, and winter cherry, which is then sold to Bangladesh pharmaceutical companies like SQUARE and ACME. The number of intermediaries and other NGOs involved in its full implementation is staggering. The connection between concern for trees and frontline

victims of climate change and de(rain)forestation is perhaps more staggering. The pharmaceutical companies, for their part, are not buying from the Garo out of any sense of obligation – as the director of the NGO contracted to conduct the “medicinal plants” training puts it: “We are yet to catch up with the demand from the pharmaceutical companies. We urge you all to promote this cultivation for an extra income and support the preservation of these valuable plants.” Valuable, indeed. In need of “preservation”? I think not. What the sale of these dresses does is finance training to create new micro-contractors for large pharmaceutical companies. Those companies have a direct and concerted interest in deforestation itself. Thus, the web of significance folds back in on itself. It is through such complex webs of funding and meaning that sales of a high-end t-shirt dress finance the production of an anti-inflammatory medication by a Bangladeshi pharmaceutical company by way of anti-climate-change advocacy linked to “forest people”.



Figure 19 - Westwood playing a deforestation villain

Chapter 6 – Conclusion: Asif’s Vision and The Climate of Suspicion

It is indeed honor and privilege for me to write to draw your kind attention to our activities with the Garo and Koch people of the Madhupur tract. As you may please know Medicinal Agriculture and Conservation Council (MACC), a volunteer organization started its activities organizing the forest dwellers who were dependent on forest to encourage them to get involved in productive activities including collection, cultivation, processing & marketing of commercially valuable medicinal plants & herbs. These activities are yielding positive results as some families are already making regular income from the production of medicinal plants.

Also, the MACC is developing Indigenous people’s Museum & Library in biodiversity conservation Fair at Telki Nokmandi in the heart of Madhupur National Park regarding Bangladesh tribe’s heritage. Walking in the jungle area, learning about medicinal plants & simply enjoying life with the Garos, I truly believe that tourists, nature lovers & environmentalists would remember their experience as one of the strongest moment of their trip.

You are cordially invited to visit our project at the field level.

Best wishes,

Asif Uddin,

Ethnic language researcher &

Chairman,

Medicinal Agriculture and Conservation Council (MACC) (sic.)

This dissertation has explored several interrelated themes taking place at the Indigenous-Environmental nexus in Bangladesh’s forest spaces. The first theme highlights the ways in which different brands of yet not completely divergent Non-Governmental Organizations fit into the setting of contemporary Bangladesh’s environmental and indigenous politics. I have also ethnographically explored what they look like on the ground and how NGOs organize their work – what is the “stuff” of this brand of NGO work – of what is it actually comprised (Chapter 2)?

The second theme explores debates about cultural performance and practice. Mandi are called to define themselves relative to a very-much-in-flux world comprised of the Bangladesh government and Forest Department, foreign and national missionaries, and national and local NGOs, as well as international discourses of indigeneity and

environmentalism. Among these definitions, the category of “culture” is often front and center. Thus, the extent to which the Mandi desire to be understood as “cultural”, and the extent to which “culture” matters are often an inevitable part of debates about Mandi futures (Chapter 3).

Following an exploration of the meaning of culture in Mandi festival, I have traced how the neoliberal development fixation with localism and entrepreneurialism finds solid symbolic ground on which to articulate its vision in the Modhupur forest. This primary “stuff” of development work in Modhupur, “alternative income generation”, builds on current development trends in “indigeneity” and “environmentalism”. This alternative income generation seeks to fit squarely with both of these pre-envisioned symbolic realms. That is, the Mandi are encouraged to undergo training and development programs which are both environmentalist and rely on a notion of what types of cultural capital an indigenous person possesses (Chapter 4).

Finally, I have explored the current trajectory of environmental (“eco-“) tourism, which has a long traceable trajectory in Bangladesh but which has not seen the types of success garnered by Nepal, Malaysia, Thailand, or India, all of to which it is commonly compared. Instead, Bangladesh’s smaller economy and lack of popularity as a tourist destination have limited demands for eco-tourism to Bangladesh army personnel stationed in forest spaces; a small number of wealthy, well-educated, and often young and idealistic Bangladeshis; and ex-patriot development, aid, and embassy workers and the occasional adventure tourist. Even with this limited market, however, the implementation of eco-tourism initiatives has substantial ramifications for people living

in and around forest spaces, often “*adivasis*”. Further, marketable or not, eco-tourism has been encouraged by the USAID-sponsored Nishorgo/IPAC organization, and following them the Forest Department, who envision eco-tourism as a way to protect vital and shrinking forest resources, a way to bring people into capitalist markets, and a way to get locals to “co-manage” and cooperate in their resource use, improving governance (Chapter 5). As such, eco-tourism promotion marries each of the themes of the previous chapters.

This dissertation has also highlighted the differential vulnerabilities experienced by several sets of actors in different NGO contexts: Minority and Environment Group (James), Integrated Protected Area Co-Management (primarily, Usman), Adivasi Upliftment Group (David and Partha), and finally Medicinal Agriculture and Conservation Council (namely, Asif Uddin). It attempts to expose many of the difficulties of doing NGO work in Bangladesh’s forest areas, positing some of the complexities and barriers to current development modalities there. These development modalities are pre- envisioned at local levels, at national bureaucratic levels, and levels in-between, and then all brought together with local sentiments and politics co-mingling with international ideals and orthodoxies of development. The end result, in many cases, seems palatable to no one. However, in the push-and-pull of development implementation, there is acceptance of some themes and projects, appropriation of some, reinterpretation of others, and outright protest of still others. What my ethnography provides is an intimate window onto this development world, highlighting the everyday interactions and personal trajectories which comprise that on-the-ground stuff of forest-area development projects.

Finally bringing together all of the themes of the previous chapters is the work of a man named Asif Uddin. I conclude in this chapter not with grand over-arching theories of the social processes and performances I have been detailing, but rather by showing their operation with a personal biography of a man who, sometimes with clear intentions and at other times subconsciously, accesses all of the themes of the previous chapters: entrepreneurial development, indigenous representation, conservation, and eco-tourism.

Asif is a man I got to know quite well throughout the course of field research and one who became a helper, confidante, and friend. Ironically enough, his work at times seems very similar to that of an anthropologist. While without formal training in most things “anthropological”, his interests, motives, and work straddles lines between ethno-linguistics, ethno-botany, and museum studies. Further, the cultural capital he deploys is one of being knowledgeable about indigenous and other cultural systems, being able to speak and translate multiple (often not widely known) languages, and being able to communicate this expertise and its importance to access grants to keep his research going. His research is very much applied, however, in that his intention is to implement new livelihood strategies based around medicinal plant cultivation to the people with whom he works, as well as to implement schools which teach in and about adivasi languages.

The overarching theme I read in these interactions and bring together in this final chapter in the person of Asif Uddin is one of enormous power differentials and differentials of vulnerability which render the way development is experienced on the

ground as, for some, everyday and commonplace, while for others, dramatic and fraught with enormous swings of fate. I call this space the “climate of suspicion”. Perhaps unsurprisingly, during the later stages of my own fieldwork, this very climate of suspicion came to be visited upon me, as I was felt to be invading defined territories of work. Though I was able to dispel some of that suspicion, it was visited swiftly and forcefully, and further illuminates how and why this climate operates.

Below, I introduce Asif more thoroughly, and detail how, despite his success in navigating Mandi culture and language and in effectively integrating current NGO modalities (perhaps too effectively), Asif came under the climate of suspicion in Modhupur.

Asif Uddin – Entrepreneur par Excellence

Asif was one of the more fascinating characters I encountered in my fieldwork. Asif was not just fascinating to me, but had become nearly a household name at my field site of Modhupur. Nearly everyone I met would chuckle a little when he was mentioned, due to his amiable and ambitious demeanor, though a little later in my visit, that chuckle was often replaced by vitriol toward Asif, a subject to which I will return later.

Asif was known because, although not from Modhupur himself (he was from near Gatail, further south toward the city of Tangail) and not a Mandi, Christian, or adivasi (he was Bengali and, by birth, a Muslim), he was always around, going from Mandi village

to Mandi village, meeting and engaging with people, and telling them excitedly about his many projects.

Asif had a good relationship, also, with the local police and forest department in Modhupur, and his reach extended even into several national NGOs at which he had developed contacts. He had a working relationship with James at MEG (Minority and Environment Group), and was known by the outgoing Chief of Party at IPAC, Bob Winterbottom, who had given Asif a relatively small grant to facilitate a small agricultural fair he had held at Telki village in 2009.

Asif began as a teacher by training among the Mandi. He taught in Mandi primary schools for nearly ten years and during that time, became intrigued by the Mandi and learned their language. The relationship he developed during these years with the idea of Mandi culture and society was an extremely powerful one, to the point where Asif seemed to channel a sort of adoption into adivasi societies. When I first encountered Asif in this environment, it was evident that he had, to some degree, dissociated himself from his Bengali Muslim identity, and also to some degree garnered an adoptive socio-cultural identity as a Mandi. His great adeptness at learning language (he was near-fluent in English, Mandi (Abeng), Hajong, and Koch in addition to his native Bangla) facilitated this process, making him an excellent if unwitting anthropologist.

Part of Asif's engagement with the adivasi communities among whom he came to work was the adoption of mentors among those communities, particularly those elders knowledgeable in the collection of what he called the "medicinal plants" of the jungle.

Somewhat systematically adopting mentors from each of the major minority ethnic groups in lowland Bangladesh (and he was starting to do so also in the Chittagong Hill Tracts), Asif gathered an immense knowledge about traditional uses of plants and their names (while at the same time learning local languages), and documenting where and how these plants grew. Asif describes his projects as having an emotional connection:

Asif: Actually, I am the nature lover, you might say. You can say, I like forest and forest people also, and their culture. So, language and plants are links from one to another person, so I want to preserve all the plants, those we have lost. So, I look in the Noawkuchi village, for example, we have more than 800 or 1,000 plants we have preserved in this village. If I can do this, I think I will be famous for it, say. Asif Uddin and his organization has done this successfully.

MACC's main project is medicinal plants, so... Medicinal plants we will bring directly, first we will show what medicinal plants are, then other plants, we will preserve them. So, it is, I think, a big project, medicinal plants. Plant cultivation, processing and marketing. There is a livelihood here. If we can know some these sorts of plants, then I think it will be a great job I have done.

Asif has had a "Garo master", a "Koch master", and a "Hajong master", among others, older men who Asif has found to be wise in the ways of culture and plants. There is an interesting mix, however, between Asif learning from his masters and teaching them. "They are my teachers, but they know nothing but *jum chash*" (swidden cultivation), he commented to me. This is doubtful, as swidden agriculture has been largely absent from these areas of Bangladesh for a generation or more, deteriorating as a system for reasons both of practicality and of legal prohibition. "Now *jum chash* is forbidden, so I'm teaching them the modern ways of agriculture, processing, and how to market and sell. They are teaching me about medicinal plants," he would intimate.

Asif: I knew one man in Joloi who knew many things, he knew many things. Then, I went to Durgapur. There, my teacher's name is Ilon Mrong. Also, in Durgapur, uh, I have forgotten his name. They are my teachers. And then different communities' *kobiraj* ("herbal healer") taught me to learn. How to learn in the forest areas they taught me. I learned many things. Medicinal plants and languages. Many researchers came to me, even they don't know the botanical names. Most of the medicinal plants, medicine actually, the educated researchers of Bangladesh actually don't know. What types of species are available, or what the indigenous people used. Actually, I am

learning it, still learning it. Even from the Koch people I am learning. I have many *kobiraj*, Marma, Chak, I have, so... Whether I'll get the fund or not, it's not my desire. My desire is to learn many things, to learn languages, to give some technologies or ideas for medicinal plants. To produce some medicinal plants. To preserve medicinal plants. The endangered medicinal plants. Whatever they lose, I want to conserve it. To learn languages. Language and then medicinal plants. One is to another, I think there is a relation.

The relationship Asif feels between indigenous languages and medicinal plants recalls the connections outlined with regard to indigeneity in Chapter 5, and references simultaneously the colonial history of adivasi representation as primitive, anthropological notions of noble savagery referenced in chapter 1, and the contemporary eco-indigeneity development paradigms outlined throughout the dissertation.

Yet Asif's connection to language and plants is not merely one of appealing to current development trends—rather, he often articulates a feeling of deep connection to these goals. Asif has constructed and embodied a persona deeply attached to these ideas as vital for the adivasis of Bangladesh. He also discusses his own awakening into secularism often, and distancing himself from his Muslim background.

If it is Asif's feelings of detachment from the Muslim community that facilitated if not drove his estrangement and re-acculturation, his purpose for remaining in the community seemed vague to many Mandis – what possible ulterior motives could someone have for dedicating himself to these projects in their communities other than some lucrative plan? When Asif received a small amount of donor funds, this suspicion seemed more warranted to Mandi leaders. Vagueness of motive and extreme suspicion from the local community in Modhupur, then, was to significantly alter his trajectory and impact him emotionally during the time I was there.

One way in which I wish to frame Asif's situation, however, in contrast to his uniqueness as a character liminal in cultural terms, is as a contemporary NGO entrepreneur par excellence. Similar to his cultural chameleonism and part of his downfall among the IPO (Indigenous People's Organization) community of Modhupur was his ability to read and adapt to the shifting NGO climate and slot himself into available opportunities in new and upcoming development models and strategies.



Photo 5 - One of his "masters", Pronash, in his house, with Asif seated to his left

From the knowledge Asif had gained among his masters and in the community was the outgrowth of several of his interrelated initiatives. Asif has made significant headway in all of the following: producing manuscripts of educational books for children in their “native”²⁰⁰ languages for learning, say, Mandi, Bengali, and English simultaneously, “trilingual” learning tools; producing guides to native “medicinal” plants of Bangladesh, including terminology in Latin, English, Bengali, and *adivasi* languages where he could gather it; opening trilingual schools with emphasis on learning English and Bengali from minority languages as well as Romanized *adivasi* alphabets, absent from state curriculums; opening a small *adivasi* cultural museum; opening a small “ecological park” showcasing native flora of Bangladesh; cultivating and selling medicinal plants to the Forest Department and local farmers; teaching about medicinal plant cultivation in several areas of Bangladesh under the heading of his NGO; and conducting educational programs under Forest Department and IPAC training headings.

The incredible breadth of Asif’s undertakings can be explained partially by personal initiative, but I mainly read Asif’s successes as evidence of his ability to read and slot into current development modalities of entrepreneurship. What was particularly impressive, especially to IPAC employees (heavily invested in entrepreneurial development modalities) was the way he was able to channel extremely limited resources into such a variety of projects, as well as to locate current niches and exploit them. Asif,

²⁰⁰ I put native in quotes because Bengali is becoming almost a first language for many indigenous children in heavily Bengali areas.

par excellence, fit the model of a candidate for development investment in a neoliberal climate.

A common phenomenon among non-governmental organizations in Bangladesh, the variety of projects NGOs undergo is astounding. Often in Modhupur, however, these organizations are backed by large funds from religious organizations or foreign donors; they are part of a substantially larger bureaucracy. The list of functions they perform is extremely broad, and this is often read merely as a function of diverse and changing funding opportunities. An almost comedic rendering (though not the slightest bit comedic or odd the many times these sentiments were expressed to me) ran like this conversation with Asif about another, large NGO:

Asif: Lokshi Koch is a worker; she is working in a local branch of a national NGO.

Alex: And what is the NGO?

Asif: Pridim. They are called Pridim.

Alex: And what does the NGO do?

Asif: Actually, I don't have any clear idea about this. But I think they have some funds, some donors.

Projects are developed to apply to whatever current funding is available. Many of these projects, it is apparent, do not go far. Expertise in a given field (vermi-compost, small business development, etc.) is limited by the size and expertise of the staff, but not necessarily limited to local results produced. The ever-present "report" is sufficient evidence. In Asif's case this is taken to an extreme. Asif is not supported by consistent funding, does not have an office or a staff beyond himself, and has zero formal training in the capacities he is pursuing. Yet he is simultaneously pursuing twelve or so separate projects.

Asif's initiative was not without its downside. More traditional development and NGO actors, and particularly the Indigenous Peoples' Organizations which had had some success in the past at resisting forest department and Bengali encroachment into their area, were quite threatened by Asif. Asif's productivity often engendered inquiries into the nature of development, a common debate in Bangladesh's development climate. That is, to what extent should development activity be characteristic of private business development, involving financial sustainability and a return on investments, and to what extent should development center more on "the social", that is, citizenship and rights frameworks, an investment in public infrastructure, and equitable distribution of resources.

While in development circles at the national and international level more neoliberal approaches to development, reliant on entrepreneurial models, has been the status quo for some time, the extent to which that translates to the local level is much less. That is, reaction against profit-driven development is strong in Bangladesh, if it ever really was accepted at the local level. The accusation of "he's making profit" is a quite charged one in NGO circles – NGO's are supposed to be run by outside funds, and any kind of self-generated income is often suspect.

I now tack back to my initial encounter with Asif, at his primary project site and frequent dwelling-place in the village of Telki in Modhupur, before describing his full-force encounter with the climate of suspicion.

Deepa's *bari* (home)

The first time I visited Asif in the Modhupur forest area, I met him near the Telki bus stand, where I had gotten down from the “tempo” (a 3-wheeled small-engine vehicle with two benches in the back for passengers). A friend of Asif's took us on his motorbike to Deepa's home, where Asif had been working for several years. After walking down the path from the road between pineapple plots, we came to an area divided in two: to our left was the family's home and to the right was a rather elaborate garden-like space.

At the house of Deepa Duzzel, Asif seemed comfortably situated. He was excited about a number of projects he was undertaking there. He had constructed a sort of museum of Mandi cultural artifacts, a small gazebo with a table for guests to eat, and several large beds of medicinal plants. Most striking and the major focal point of the garden was what was indicated to me as a “*nokmandi*”. This “traditional” Garo house is familiar to those looking at ethnography of the Garo Hills, as well as areas in Bangladesh, though the structures have been nearly absent from the country for generations (Burling 1997). Asif had a close relationship with Deepa, who worked diligently as a laborer for these projects. The way he presented them to me, she and her family would be the main beneficiaries and he was more of a facilitator.

I am told no one usually sleeps in the *nokmandi*, and I may sleep there if I want the cultural “experience”. It's a sort of museum, though Asif has sensed that I am a little surprised at his construction of a Garo museum given that he is not Garo himself. In a sense, he offered me his version of an immersive tourist experience. After giving me a

tour, including a rare bird he had purchased (“for conservation”), he showed me where to bathe at the tube well. Deepa cooked some Mandi food while he took me to her daughter’s house next door to try some *chu* for the first time. After some *chu*, Asif opened up and revealed even more of his passion for his projects, which he genuinely believes in as bringing goodwill.

Asif as a jungle man

Asif often makes the distinction between jungle people and town people. According to him, the Garo escape to the jungle to get away from Bengalis and from the implied corruption of the city, a claim supported by many ethnographic and quasi-ethnographic accounts. That’s where they like to live, Asif reports, and he feels a kinship to them; that’s where he likes to live also. His daughter, who goes to school in Tangail, says he doesn’t dress nicely, he jokes, that he dresses like a *jungle man*.

Asif relates to food in a similar way, through ideas about the natural. Naturalness of food is apparent for Asif as well. Asif loved the fresh milk in the villages along the border among Hindu Koch people in contrast to the usual condensed milk. Wild and natural foods like eel (a Garo favorite) and jungle plants were something Asif repeatedly emphasized as important to Garo cooking (and distinct from the town cooking of Bengalis).

There is a growing and widespread awareness in Bangladesh about the dangers of certain pesticides. At its most cosmopolitan, this involves organizations like Nayakrishi Andolon, which focus on seed banks and mount a critique of genetically-modified high

yield rice varieties which have helped to feed Bangladesh's population, but are alleged to be destroying the soil. But this discourse is not confined to elite activist intellectuals. Rather, Bangladeshis of most classes are of the understanding that pesticides, used extensively and with little to no regulation, are harmful. In addition to pesticides are the numerous techniques for quick ripening of fruit and bringing to market fresh-looking produce. The two terms used to describe these problems (and typically expressed with these English terms) are "medicine" (pesticides) and "hormones" (ripening agents). Produce is often marketed by saying "*Medicine chara*", "without pesticides or ripeners, naturally grown, organic". Asif participates in this discourse and uses it to market his ideas and projects.

Asif dislikes the capital of Dhaka and would never go there again if he could avoid it, expressing his disdain for Dhaka in naturalistic terms.²⁰¹ With Asif, medicinal plants (*oshudher gach*) was the buzzword²⁰². Everything was about medicinal plants. He

²⁰¹ Bangladeshis' relationship to Dhaka is varied and complex. Like many urban centers, it holds the allure of the city, of job prospects, of increased educational opportunities for one's children, of escaping the poverty and lack of the village, the *obhab*. But it threatens the soul, it threatens connections to the village. Two main ways in which I hear Dhaka disparaged are via the "village" and via the "jungle", which are not universal, but often map respectively onto relatively working class and recent Dhaka immigrants and to upper-class, educated, cosmopolitan Dhaka-ites. Immigrant labor often reference connection to their home village as what is missing in their Dhaka lives, often connected to family. Urbanites want to escape the pollution, the *jantrik sohorer jibon* ("mechanical city life"). Not having as strong a connection to the village, and sometimes even shunning its backwardness, nature as playground and escape is more the valence. There is a lot of overlap, however, the village and Sonar Bangla ("Golden Bengal") motif is often expressed in very naturalistic terms, while sometimes even urbanites long for the village.

²⁰² Homeopathy is caught in national discourse between being backward and being a way away from harmful chemicals and other deleterious effects of industrial agriculture and food processing. What often differs between this discourse in the West and in the developing world, particularly in a country like Bangladesh so young and which seems always eager to represent itself well to the outside, is how vital these kinds of debates become to national identity. The line between "real" homeopathy and "fraudulent" homeopathy is not always easily drawn. Particularly under fire, especially by national secular press, are faith-based village healers. A recent front-page news story on nearly every major daily involved twin infants fraught with illness who, by a traditional healer, were spun around by one foot each, then stepped on, in an effort to cleanse them of their ailments. At the last minute, someone decided the boys were about to die, and rushed them to a medical doctor who saved them, despite severe hip displacement and severely damaged abdominal organs.

would point out this plant and that, excitedly, but often unspecifically, as if the category was more important than the specific object itself. Perhaps it was. Medicinal plants carry a valence in the NGO sector, and in the environmental sector. Asif's deployment of "*oshudher gach*" was embedded in a web of NGO symbolics, but it was also personal: Asif is passionate about plants. Asif was particularly proud to display, to me and to his indigenous friends, that he could name many of these plants in several languages. Sometimes he could cite a Latin name, but Mandi (Abeng) were the most available to him, followed by Bengali names, and then other ethnic groups' names.

Too Many Projects

It is immediately apparent as Asif takes me around his space here that he has a slew of projects he is pursuing simultaneously. As noted earlier, Asif is "documenting indigenous languages", "writing textbooks in indigenous languages to teach English and to teach Bengali", "trying to publish indigenous language schoolbooks", "working on a manual of ethnobotany in Bangladesh", "building a cultural museum", "putting together a botanical museum", "organizing a biodiversity fair", and "collecting medicinal plants". While all of these projects can be grouped into two broad themes, "medicinal plants" and

What was somewhat remarkable about the way this story was presented is that it focused on the authenticity of the performer. This seemed to be the more important subtext than the actual practice or the children's' safety. He was found to be a phony, with no real training or understanding of faith healing, but outwardly, the efficacy of homeopathy in general or this particular faith tradition was not called into question. This idea of authenticity is not confined only to homeopathy in the press, but many means by which being "modern and sensible" is accessed. A salient example is the debate over road safety, which tends to center on the inauthenticity of bus drivers. The meat of the critique becomes that bus drivers may be operating without genuine licenses rather than addressing the broader social element of driving practices or the construction of highways through village marketplaces.

“indigenous culture”, they represent a large range of skill requirements, and comprise quite an ambitious undertaking. It should be noted that the Medicinal Agriculture and Conservation Council, MACC, is only Asif. Asif consistently uses the first person plural “we” when describing his organization, but he is the sole member. The woman on whose land he performs this work, Deepa, could definitely be considered a partner, but he does not describe the relationship as such. Rather, “she is working with me” and “she derives benefit” and “she helps me out”, but she is not part of MACC. MACC is an NGO, a professional organization with the ability to communicate to donors and others in the NGO community in English and, while Asif spends the vast majority of his time living on Deepa’s land, there is a sense that its location is elsewhere. That lack of location is partly what gives an NGO its power—there is always an elsewhere. A “local” NGO can derive a different kind of power and valence by its very localism (detailed in chapter 4), by being embedded in local politics and concerns, but its true power comes from cosmopolitanism, a lack of being embedded in place, which links it to humanity’s broader concerns. Referencing a larger assumed good while being embedded in place is a vital part of NGO positioning:

Asif: Not that I am struggling... I have given some ideas, just a way to... because the forest is losing. The forest department is doing monoculture. And the owner of these plots are outsiders. So they have no access to income, cannot go to the forest for firewoods. Or for the tubers, whatever they have harvested before. So day by day they were moving to a bad position. In that position I just suggested to them to change their lifestyles. What is the culture, just some medicinal plants. This was my idea, that if I can change their agriculture – *jum chash* (“swidden agriculture”) is not possible. So once upon a time, whenever the jungle, when they were the owner of the jungle with free entrance of the jungle. Then they could ... at that time they were in a good position for *jum* cultivation.

Environmentalism typically invokes this non-local register, as do references to global indigeneity. Bangladesh, in a sense, is constantly at pains to de-localize itself, while donors are pushing the other way. It is in this tension between the cosmopolitans localizing their concerns and the locals cosmopolitanizing their concerns that much of NGO performance takes place. The affective labor required of NGO settings is very involved in negotiating this boundary.

A quick critique of this proposition might state that this is the activation of a binary that does not exist. In fact, the symbolics of linking toward the global or toward the local are much more complex. There are a variety of possible scales here from which this negotiation takes place, and there may be many instances in which an already-relatively-cosmopolitan entity is looking to go even further broad in its scale, or a local entity looking to really localize.

Take the case of MACC, for example. If Deepa Duzzel, the owner of this land, could have petitioned (via a dictation, as she is not literate) for some kind of help in cultivating medicinal plants on a small scale, the letter would not have made it anywhere near large donors or development programs. (Leaving aside for a minute that this modality would have been unfamiliar to her.) The idea is that local implementers are offering these services with funds and logistical support by providing the next level of broad scope, and so on, in a large cooperative scheme, with large funds at one end.

Sometimes, however, these chains can be bypassed by the type of performance Asif was able to enact. A prerequisite is English language skills to some degree, though a crafty performer may even be able to outsource some of that work, to a foreign friend like

myself or an English-speaking college student. Language is crucial, and that language is English, for communicating in foreign milieus. Beyond that, however, what Asif is able to perform is a fluidity of scale. It took me, as an anthropologist, a good amount of time to really understand how small Asif's operation was, due to this tacking back and forth between his personal projects and his broader visions.

Asif: No, they have no resources to get medicinal plants, or use them, because they have the rice field. Roadside plantations, conservation, they are not in that situation. So my idea one day will come, in Modhupur also, it will rise, my ideas. They will support it, feel that Asif Uddin was good and we should have done it. The results should be what we expect. My ideas and my ways of finding sources of income will be in Modhupur one day will come. But it will take time, or I have to wait. And I'll prove it, whenever they'll be successful. The ways are different, I'm just working there. So when the people, the farmers, will be selling then they'll have income. And the poor people will work in the gardens. The medicinal plants garden. A day will come when they say yes, it was right. Perhaps it will take some time.

But Asif's time in Modhupur, it turns out, was limited.

Suspicion at MACC

Asif had received direct funding from direct subsidiaries of USAID and Oxfam. As such a small operation, how did he bypass normal channels of bureaucracy and funding? By his skill in performing the role of a sophisticated NGO—what Asif performed was not just a skill set of professionalism. In fact, his everyday wardrobe and affect render him almost akin to a wandering ascetic at times. He wears baggie pants and a relatively old polo shirt, and carries a cloth bag, hardly the appearance of a professional NGO man. But what Asif was able to tap into was the confluence of ideas that *sound good*, that match well with the broad symbolics of development in vogue: MACC was able to marry three valences: environmentalism (biodiversity and conservation), indigeneity (Garo culture), and neoliberal entrepreneurialism (alternate income

generation). He was, in a sense, in the right place at the right time. The way in which he was able to do this was an important part of his subsequently being run out of Telki on a rail. Though only a single event, his small agricultural fair, the way in which Asif, as such a small-time operator, was able to directly appeal to, to tap into, those sensibilities among big donors, appeared to many locals as almost supernatural. His motives, it was clear to them, must be sinister. The money he got must be tainted, profit, despite his history and friendships in the community.

There were other reasons for Asif being pushed out of Telki – he was an “outsider”, an easy applicable label to a *mussolman* in a formerly Mandi-only area; Telki itself had its own problems, including a volatile micro-local political culture and a growing reputation as a highway-side drinking den. Asif’s symbolic as well as geographic proximity to these issues meant he was easily scapegoated. What being awarded near-direct funds from Oxfam and USAID provided, however, were a measure of the severity of the problem, and the sinister forces at play.

The variety of evil-doing attributed to Asif Uddin was astounding when one saw the actual scale of the project and the organization. Particularly disheartening (several times to the point of tears to me) was the feeling that he had been betrayed by friends. Asif advertised to me, again and again, that “people loved him” here, in Telki, and especially in more remote villages like Jongolia and Chunia. And it certainly appeared that they did. He spoke Mandi in a way that often changed the tone to more local concerns and character at public tea stalls where Bengali was being spoken. Always

friendly, he engendered mutual warmth from those he met. But one day, at least in public, it changed. An opposition had been mounted by powerful local NGO leaders, and the reaction was swift. Almost overnight, Asif who appeared as a benevolent and good-natured wandering *ex-mussolman* had changed into a calculating profiteer.

Asif Under Attack

One key performance I observed as part of the mounting offense against Asif was that of the young, good-looking, and upwardly-mobile Raju Sangma. Raju was then working for the Daily Star, a widely-distributed and reputable English daily newspaper, and building a campaign for a position in AUG as well. He had come to Telki to speak to a youth organization, motivating them to work for Garo betterment, and encouraging them to stay on the path of education. After Raju's speech to the youth, many adult locals came and a meeting about local concerns was orchestrated. One of the main foci of the meeting was a near-trial-in-absentia of the now-notorious Asif Uddin and what to do about him. As the meeting proceeded, there was no defense of Asif. The leaders on stage were asked by perceptive locals "I thought you liked this guy," or "I have seen you with this guy," and they politely explained that they had been fooled. "I thought he was okay, but I have now seen the error of my ways," was the general sentiment.

As the only foreigner in the meeting, and one with obvious connections to Asif, I was finally invited to speak. And I failed to state what I believed. I was still new to the area, still felt relatively unfamiliar, and was uncomfortable with deploying any kind of power invested in me by my whiteness or Americanness. Perhaps most importantly,

however, I felt as perhaps many of Asif's former friends did, that if I did not disavow my friendship too, I would be branded a traitor to the community and, like Asif, not be able to do my work among these powerful local leaders. I copped out. Asked to speak, I merely said that Asif had introduced me to the area, and had helped me, but that I didn't work with him. What was true is that I did not work for his organization, MACC, and did not do NGO work at all. In a loose English translation that was what I said, but perhaps subconsciously I knew that the extremely broad meaning of *kaj* (work, activity) would exempt me from nearly any productive association with Asif, which was, basically, a lie. I had committed an ethnographic betrayal.²⁰³

²⁰³ See K. Visweswaran's 1994 *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* for an essay on "ethnographic betrayal" in fieldwork.



Photo 6 – Farmer and skilled handyman Rifat Islam and Mandi herbalist, near Jhenagati, pausing from fence-building for MACC in Jhenagati.

I regret not standing up for Asif, someone who became a confidante and a friend, despite our strong disagreements on some of his later, more ambitious projects in the Jhenagati area. I wanted to be accepted by these local political leaders, and their power was palpable, even at that small meeting.

I was rewarded with an invitation to drink with the men at a nearby house. While pitchers of rice beer were passed around, filled and refilled, and I joked with the men, I was reassured that Asif was the source of evil. While in the abstract, I was told that perhaps many of Asif's problems could have been avoided if he had simply consulted on his projects with local leaders instead of being such a lone wolf, implications were much more sinister. With a few qualifications to the tune of "well, I'm not totally sure if he's involved, but you connect the dots", Asif was again, implicated in the charge of prostitution. And how better to tar someone that that "he is selling our women", the delicate valence of which my Mandi friends knew translated well into Bengali and American sensitivities.

The narrative was well-constructed. Raju Sangma repeated the story he had told his Mandi audience in Bengali to me in his flawless English:

I was in the village [of Telki] and enjoying some wine with my friends, when someone [a Bengali Muslim out-of-towner] is asking for a flower. I say, flowers, yes, we have flowers, many kinds of flowers. We have rose, water lily, orchid, all kinds of flowers. He says no, a *flower*. Then I realized he was talking about a girl. He wanted us to provide him with a Mandi girl.

He chuckled, calling attention to the absurdity of the situation. Through his short narrative, Raju also emphasized his own naivety. Flowers are beautiful and innocent, and it didn't even occur to him that at the drinking establishment he was patronizing someone

may be looking for a prostitute. This was a place of innocent flowers, and innocent girls. The outsider was corrupting this zone, corrupting the village, corrupting the culture, and threatened to corrupt the women. And this was the type of person that Asif was attracting, if not friends with. He went on:

And other times people were saying, 'you are there. Raju is there with his friends making noise and carrying on' [at the drinking dens in Telki]. But I was in Dhaka. I wasn't even there!

Raju chuckled again. At this point, Raju was pointing out, his reputation was also at stake. His association with Asif, and by association drinking, prostitution, and eco-parks was too much, and he had to answer to his community. As such, Raju felt compelled to perform a disavowal of Asif as well, by social forces larger than himself.

The charge of prostitution has particular valences in village contexts. Not only this, but the fear of prostitution was central to peoples' explanations of their resistance to tourism in the Modhupur area. Seeing this as a key problematic effect of tourism in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, it just made sense that this micro-scale tourism promoter in Modhupur was engaged in the selling of women, and was just the brush needed with which to tar Asif.

This thinking filtered quickly through leadership channels in Modhupur. Catholic priests of the area were more than willing to accept the idea that a Bengali Muslim was engaged in such heinous activities at the expense of their flock. A relatively new priest to the area, Father Shushanto, warned me of his activities, as did the long-time and much-beloved Father Samuel Bergman. Though Asif had earlier received Father Bergman's blessing (in the form of a signed letter supporting Asif's work in "preserving Mandi

culture” and “medicinal plants”), the priest had since become convinced of powerful forces at play. With subtle implications about prostitution and purveyance of alcohol for profit, the otherwise relatively no-nonsense straight-shooter-of-a-man told me with a straight face that Asif was “pure evil”. While Father Bergman, over eighty years old, was sometimes quick to make these judgments, his speaking so ill of Asif might have been the nail in the coffin.

At this point, it was obvious, Asif had received a scapegoat status, in which all of local problems could be invested in him: Tensions among Garo men over protecting “our women”, coupled with cultural embarrassment, humiliation, and emasculation at being matrilineal and matrilocal and trying to fit into larger Bengali society, with its heavy patriarchy; Tensions over the preservation of culture and battling with alcoholism in the face of changing social and economic patterns; Tensions over who was able to speak for the Garo and their culture, to represent them; Tensions over how best to utilize the cultural valence of indigenous on the global-local market of indigenous development; Tensions over land in the face of increasing control by Bengali “outsiders” and Muslims; And even the still-fresh violence of the Eco Park wall construction initiatives by the forest department. Asif’s small medicinal plants and cultural museum was, for many people an “Eco Park”, carrying the above valences of property transfer, prostitution, alcohol sales to outsiders, and perhaps most importantly, “walling” of areas of formerly free passage.

Asif was practically shunned from the community among which he had built friendships and a work-life over more than a decade. He was forbidden from showing his

face in Telki and nearby Gaira, which is where Deepa's house was as his primary project spot. Asif later opened a store on the avenue of the Pochish Mile highway market right next to a police lookout, from which he was still able to sell medicinal plants and display a small demonstration plot. But primarily, he moved his entire operation to a new and ostensibly friendlier location far north near Jhenagati. I read Asif's excommunication as multiple-layered; no one facet fully explains the rapidity and forcefulness with which popular opinion of Asif shifted.

Starting at the most concrete level, Asif had failed to adequately prostrate himself to local leadership before and during his projects. Stepping on toes did not serve him well. It was these local leaders who signed a petition against him and were able to carry enough weight to mount the opposition.

Some of Asif's projects, further, carried the connotation if not the actuality of implementing tourism in the Modhupur area. Tourism and any kind of "eco-park" had an extremely bad name in this area following the "eco-park wall" incident. Regardless of Modhupur already being a minor tourism destination in the form of several rentable guest houses, an observation tower, and a deer pen, any further moves in this direction were indeed a sensitive issue in the wake of the killing of a Mandi eco-park wall protestor and the brutal torturing and death of another community organizer.

Coupled with this negative valence of tourism was the horrible specter of prostitution. Although prostitution seemed nearly absent from Modhupur forest and its tourist spaces, this charge got peoples' attention. Coupled with the prostitution charge were the general accusations of misbehavior that included the sale of alcohol to rowdy

outsiders. Ironically, Asif's alcohol consumption only took place at Deepa's house and was rarely rowdy. Instead, the rowdiness came from the nearby compound which often doubled as a bar. When there was available liquor, local Mandis and Bengalis stopping off of the highway could stop into one of the few places nearby where alcohol could be consumed without fear of prosecution, capitalizing on general police hands-off policies toward this "cultural practice" of *chu* consumption. The leaders of Gaira village seemed to be scapegoating Asif partly due to their frustration with a significant portion of their village being transformed into such a drinking den.²⁰⁴ Ironically, Asif considered part of the importance of his work in Telki to be providing a source of income apart from alcohol sale:

Asif: The situation now is that they should change their operations. Wine business is like that, perhaps – the day will come they will not be able to do so. So this is a problem actually. The families, all the families depend on it. This is not a permanent profession. People should use beer or wine for cultural reasons. Actually, selling is not... the people of the community say, those who are Garos, they say "selling wine is not allowed in our society." So I am against that.

Finally and centrally was the matter of Asif's religion and ethnicity. In Mandi eyes, the Mussolman is shrewd and calculating, always looking for and often finding a way to make business. Asif's history in the community as a teacher and as a friendly guy could only have been so swiftly and adequately undermined with the inclusion of this racialized perception. And this perception, of course, was heavily influenced by its own

²⁰⁴ Drinking den it was. A half-clothed, drunken man stumbled through the middle of a makeshift childrens' cricket match yelling and swatting at house walls with a stick. A group of Bengali men scoffed and jeered at those around them. And the distribution was done with much whispering and passing of a relatively huge amount of money, as opposed to the communal and shared atmosphere in which *chu* was normally consumed – thrusting beer into others' mouths as a sign of difference and bond. One respected man I knew seemed mortally embarrassed when I saw him there. Much different than the festival locations of *chu* consumption in Mandi villages, or the hosting of guests with *chu*, the atmosphere was strikingly different in this place. I only visited once, and once was enough for me. What this space provided was particularly striking due to its rarity. With no particular shared cultural expectations for this type of bar setting, the space seemed dripping with sadness.

history. Mandi experiences of being taken advantage of by Bengali Muslim outsiders went back a long way (see chapter 1). This racialized perception, in turn, also relates strongly to and greatly amplifies the community anxieties about sexual protection of its women.

Deepa's desperation

Asif was not the only one affected by his forced exile from the village areas of Modhupur. In fact, Asif's mobility and non-rootedness in place allowed him to pivot to another site on which he had trained his sights, and one, at least for the moment, much friendlier to his projects. Asif began to spend the majority of his time in Jhenagati, far from Modhupur, while tacking back to Modhupur to check in on the shop he had set up in Pocchish Mile, which he was "allowed" to keep.

But his long-time partner, Mandi *nokna* (heiress) Deepa Duzzel, felt devastated by the blow. She had worked with Asif for nearly ten years on transforming her land in medicinal plant cultivation and a small cultural museum. And she felt completely betrayed by her community, or at least by its leaders. Long after the petition had been launched by Asif, I visited Deepa at her *bari*, and she came near tears several times, explaining her situation, her confusion, her desperation, continually repeating the phrase "*Ami ki korbo?*", "What will I do?"

Just a few days prior to my visit, someone, she was not sure who, went to the length of vandalizing her aloe vera garden. We speculated that was with the intention of further intimidating her and discouraging her associations with the vilified Asif Uddin

who, although he had stopped coming to her land and village, she still sold aloe vera with in the market at Pocchish Mile.

I asked her who she believes is responsible for this continued ill-will, and she named first and foremost, Shushma Simsang, secretary of Abeng Mohila and secondly, Partha Mrong, former head of AUG. Abeng Mohila is primarily a women's organization, founded as a sort of sister organization to the AUG. Both are invested in culture and cultural protection and land protection, of the human rights-NGO variety.

What Deepa's desperate situation primarily evidences, then, is the way that in this NGO Climate of Suspicion, different actors are caught up in the politics and the system with very different levels of vulnerability. While the politics and powerful positions of people like Partha, David, and Shushma, could be challenged (for example, by people like William Duzzel) by other Mandi who disagreed with them, their overall positions of respect and influence in the community could not be seriously threatened. And out-of-town staff working for IPAC or MEG could hardly be touched by these concerns – they could dub them petty village politics, and move on.

In contrast, both Asif and Deepa, for example, in various ways, evidenced an amount of vulnerability, and had the potential to suffer greatly, to undergo enormous swings of fate based on these political moves by Mandi or out-of-town NGO elites. As Deepa put it to me:

If I say to Abeng Mohila that I am still going to do this kind of work, are they going to vandalize my garden? Then why wouldn't there be a problem? There will be a problem. You think I will have any help? Everyone I have tried to work with, started with, is now giving me trouble. What kind of help! They are educated, and I am not educated. I work with educated people when I am able. But Bangladeshi people only want money.

To give an example, I was working these gardens on my land, right? In the garden we both did some of the work, we two people, Asif and I did this together. Then I see that everyone, lots and lots of NGOs, big, big NGOs came here. They saw the work we had done and gave some funds. Government too might see it, okay? When they come, they see it's going well, and they might give some help for the work I am not able to do myself. I am uneducated, but I am a good person. They do one kind of work, I do a different sort of work. I support Achik-Michik, but I also need support. I am merely a villager.

I also have met some foreigners. Because of this they are protesting? If there is a protest will I get anything? I will not get anything. They give others trouble and then say that "they have worked". Or even "we together have worked". This is how it happens. But in this way they are calculating, in this way. In one way they speak, but in another way they sell. Everywhere they sell.

Those that are NGO, they have so much paid work. I though, I was good, and giving. Those that are NGO, it's a few who have taken much. Eat from the garden, then destroy it. They talk behind my back. They were working with me. With those NGO people they did this, with them they did this. To my garden! What a disaster! I spoke with them, I tried to work with them, and this happened anyway. How is this fair? In this way, I will be put out on the road, where will I live?

Asif's Translocation to Jhenagati

After the confrontation in Modhupur, Asif shifted his project ideas to Jhenagati, near Bangladesh's northern border with India. He viewed Jhenagati as a far less contentious place in which to work. Modhupur, due to its close concentration of Mandi lives and livelihoods, its concentrated and lucrative forest space, and its proximity to Dhaka, was indeed known for defensive postures toward NGO and development programs. Though still working with similar ideas, Asif had far less competition from the more fierce politics of Modhupur, and far less interference from people based in Dhaka, as Jhenagati is much further from the capital, in a border area.

I was personally somewhat uncomfortable with the way he was implementing things in Jhenagati, partly because I sympathized with some of the more subtle arguments against Asif in Modhupur. That is, I was uncomfortable with the extent to which Asif was

undertaking his own agenda, assuming broad generalizations about the general positivity of “conserving resources” with the assumed betterment of the community, intending to transform peoples’ own livelihood strategies (rice cultivation, grazing, forest produce collection) into ones he deemed more environmentally sensitive and culturally appropriate (environmental and cultural tourism and, primarily, medicinal plant cultivation). But partly, as a friend I feared for Asif that eventually, Mandi leadership which now seemed supportive, if they eventually found his activities to be somewhat productive or threatening to their local power, would turn against him, as those in Modhupur had done.

As I stood with Asif in the middle of a swath of land shared by a village in Jhenagati in which his friends and employees were constructing a fence, I finally confronted him more directly about these problems. What I saw happening seemed similar to what the Mandi had lost lives confronting in Modhupur, though on a much smaller scale – the walling-off of common spaces for “conservation” and the implementation of a museum-like, nature-as-spectacle. As I watched children playing on one side of the field in front of a local Khali temple, and a woman grazing cattle on the other side, and as a third group of local leaders (then in the process of campaigning for their political party) convened there also, I asked Asif – did he see the way this space was now common, was used and effectively negotiated by all? Did he see the way in which this space being fenced off would transform that space, and even the free passage through it?

Alex: I'm still confused, why, why are you building a fence here?

Asif: The fence, actually, as this is a road, no? Common roads, people go and come if there is no fencing here. So it harms all of these plants. Here, and here. It is a quiet place, right? Only the *puja* ("worship") committee's people, and those who come here to do *puja* should be allowed to enter. And the outsiders, those who will come here to enjoy the birds or medicinal plants of different sorts, to study medicinal plants, only they will enter. And before entering into the area, they will have to abide by some rules. You have to be this way, act this way, do not talk loudly, right? Some directions should be given before entering.

But actually, this is a very small place, so we should implement this not just here, but at two or three local places – one, another. So whenever tourists or researchers will come to enjoy the plants, they will enjoy the plants here, and the rare species here. It might be two or three hundred, or a thousand species we have. All kinds of plants will be planted in these types of places. And we can transplant from one place to another, so the researcher can move from one to another, huh? Because we need some lands, because, uh, 500 species is a lot of trees. So, they are taking the very small areas. But I'm thinking, in the villages also, going through these roads to the Margan para ("Margan Koch neighborhood"), there are some roads and some lakes. We can install some plants which are not contained here, outside of our space. And we can record here, that we have these sorts of plants in these areas, so researchers will learn it from here. They look at these charts and they can research it. We can even give the location with maps, what sorts of plants are there. Define—these sorts of plants are in these areas. So they can easily move from one village to another.

Alex: So there's going to be a gate there with a person charging money to get in here? And then this is going to be fenced also? On four sides?

Asif: Yes, I'm thinking we have to do it, because outside the gate, in these areas, so many plants are here. So, actually it may be open for all to enjoy. But only the researchers will enter there and also here. And not only these areas, but they are allowed to enjoy all the plants outside going through this road, this 2 kilometers, the 2 kilometers of roadsides and family sides, the farm-friendly medicinal plants and small gardens. In Margan para, we have 135 species of plants. So we'll add something there also. These areas also will be the part of our collection. Because it is not possible to preserve all sorts of plants in a small area. So, we need more areas. So, why will we plant them? Because they will get benefits from them.

Alex: Who will get benefits?

Asif: The lands on which they are planting, the households will get benefits. From the small, small-scale aloe vera. They will be given simply 1,000 plants, for each person's farm. Some plants will be given to them, only for demonstration. So from aloe vera and other plants, they are getting benefitted, and we are not the owner of these trees. So, why will the farmers do it? Because, if they do not get money, they will not be interested, they will not preserve these trees.

This is why some farmers, those who are farmers, if they preserve these sorts of plants, they will, I think get a benefit. It's one place to another, connecting. From Jamtali to Kalistan. Kalistan to Margan para. Margan para to Garo para. To Mashubaton, to ... Heah? So there will be, uh...

Alex: So after this park is built here, the cows will not be able to graze here, and the children will not be able to play here? And it's a common land, that they are using for multiple purposes. Religious purposes, cows are grazing here, children play here, and you're talking about building a fence around it. Do you see any problem with this?

Asif: No, no, no, no. Children will be, children will not be able to, no. And because I discussed it with the leaders and actually, they are interested, because they will do it for their own interest, because we told them and we organized meetings. And at the meetings, two times, they have already agreed. Already I raised these problems, what sorts of problems we may face. But they say, as it is our public, our committee's land, we need to preserve it. If it is safe like this, it will be good for us. And their name will be hanged to the signboard.

Alex: It seems to me that there are two possible scenarios here. One possibility is no one comes to the park. No one knows about the park, it's too far away, so no one comes to the park, and there is no benefit, right? You're not getting any admission, and no one is coming here to learn. Another possible scenario is many, many people come to the park and there will be lots and lots of noise, there will be people all through these villages. I mean, I don't understand what you're envisioning here, Asif-da, I mean, you're talking about building a cottage here, but there are no tourists here. So you're talking about building a cottage on somebody's rice land, and then, maybe the tourists will come? I mean, this is a space that obviously this community uses, right? And you're talking about building a fence around it. Does the Tribal Welfare Association know about your ideas?

(Intensity of bird noises.)

Asif: Yes, they know. All the Tribal Welfare Association Chairmen were in agreement there, at the meeting. Rebecca Mrong and others were present. And they agreed. I have taken photos and recorded it. Already she has voted, in front of all these members, more than 50% were present there at the meeting. And Rebecca Mrong said in a speech that this is a very nice idea, so...

Alex: I mean, I kind of understand, I sympathize with the idea of planting trees, this is great. I just don't understand why the fence, why the wall...

Asif: But, maybe what you are thinking is that it is like Modhupur. Actually the fence is not big like the wall in Modhupur. So yes, I know there are possible problems... Whenever people enter inside the, inside the place, they always do harm to the temples and the trees...

Alex: Who's doing harm to the temples? The trees are fine. The trees have been here for a long time and nobody has disturbed them, why do you need a fence?

Asif: We also need a fence, as cows are also forbidden here to graze. For the community. Because, actually sometimes they harm the trees and the plants, and it's not local people but outsiders actually who bring their cows here. I think, Alex, it will not be a problem for them. The cows are grazing here, the children play. So it will be a problem. But they say no, we want to stop this way, and we will only allow entrance to some, and for the public we want to preserve it. It's according to *their* opinions, and their goals, not only mine.

Alex: Do you worry that the same thing that happened in Modhupur might happen to you here?

Asif: I think it will not. In Modhupur, I don't know whether they [Mandi leaders who ostracized him] are right or wrong. I say they are wrong. But if they say they are right, *the people* will not say that they are right. The people of this community will not say that. Those guys are not... What is Asif doing and what are they doing. The people of the community, whole community knows very well. So I'm sure that I'll get many votes if I were up for election. (Laughing.) All the population in Modhupur's areas. If you ask people, especially Garos, they will support me. Yes, Asif Uddin is right and they are wrong. They'll say it. Few NGO people will say, I don't know why. I am waiting, I am waiting for a successful development story of Modhupur, as every weekend I have to go back to Modhupur. I'll tie it together. Perhaps then I'll have to move many places. Then I have to move to many parts, many parts of the regions of Bangladesh. Because my hobby is to learn languages. To learn languages and to collect species, different species. So I'll take it. This is my desire. Both.

Understanding the Climate of Suspicion in NGO Work

Success in NGO work is dependent on a generalized problem of brand management in an often desperate space of limited resources, in addition to its affective dimensions of engendering trust, authenticity, and charitable concern. The NGO sector is a huge source of employment, and NGO jobs are often the most respectable option available to educated villagers. NGOs also offer a way for people to deploy affect as entrepreneurs. What I mean by that is that rather than selling a product, NGO workers are selling a project, their abilities, their education and experience, and even their "character" and honesty in doing development and charitable work. As such, their work is largely in affecting professionalism, trustworthiness, and entrepreneurialism, as well as a generosity of spirit.

NGOs must convince local communities that nepotism is not taking place, in an environment in which nepotism is expected, if not the standard way of doing business. NGOs are constantly under suspicion, from each other, from the communities in which

they work, and from the donor or larger organizations which contract with them, a realm I refer to as the “climate of suspicion”.

The NGO is such an ingrained part of the landscape in Bangladesh that there is a certain level of saturation with the concept. Though most NGO workers will tell you in their offices about the good work they are doing, or that their inspiration for entering the NGO sector was to help people, many retired NGO workers and friends will candidly express doubts about the whole system. A sentiment often expressed is ambivalence or even skepticism about NGOs and those employed with them. Many, many will tell you that “in actuality, they don’t do much”.

A big part of the work that goes on at local NGOs is local politics and brand management. Offend the wrong (respected) person, and one could end up in the midst of a smear campaign. These smear campaigns are easily orchestrated because they play on people’s suspicion of NGOs on several levels. A general level is a class dimension – these are the educated class. Along with that, NGO workers are often multi-lingual. In the case of mid-level office workers interacting with foreign or educated Bengali staff in Dhaka, they often speak a significant amount of English in addition to their native Bangla. In the case of local staff, they may be fluent in local idioms and manner of speech or, in the case of minority ethnic communities, may be fluent in that local language (Mandi, Chakma, etc.) in addition to Bangla, and some are fluent in three languages. This presents a threat to local mono-lingual people, who cannot be sure of what worlds these intermediaries are privy to. Yet another dimension is economic – poor and laboring classes are clearly a realm apart economically from those able to perform

such types of affective labor. A further dimension is the character of this labor itself. To a local observer, the labor performed at NGOs may seem bizarre if not non-existent in its immateriality. What actual “labor” are these people doing? Are they providing a good? Are they working the land? The most common scene in an NGO office is the drinking of tea. Occasionally someone is processing some paperwork or writing on a board, but what is their *kaj*, their work?

Even the very fact of accepting donor money is cause for suspicion. Where is that money going? Why is it being provided to these middle-class bureaucrats instead of directly to the poor who need it?

Conversely, however, one may be charged with inappropriately pursuing profit. This is often referred to as “making business”. Ironically, “making business” can also refer to the misappropriate use of donor funds. The negative valence of “making business” in the NGO community thus presents somewhat of a paradox – whether one is ostensibly carrying out charitable work with the section of a large donor or one is supporting one’s own enterprise through some kind of a profit-generating scheme (typically micro-credit), one is yet under suspicion.

If “making business” is a negative charge against a given project, it is one of the many ways in which projects like IPAC, for example, come under suspicion. One of IPAC’s main focuses is on doing exactly that, on bringing people into the market.

The moral charges associated with micro-credit are extremely visible in Bangladesh. Islamic banking, for one, renders usury or the taking of interest suspect. The recent maligning of Muhammad Yunus (Nobel Prize winner credited for inventing the

concept of micro-credit) in the national spotlight was easy to do, for this among other reasons. Nearly without exception, an NGO office (with the knowledge of the suspicion around it) will tell you *last* that micro-credit is what they do, whereas locals will complain *first* that it is basically *all* a given NGO does in their area. In any case, aside from donations, this is the primary economic sustenance mechanism for many of them.

What else must an NGO manage in order to reduce suspicion? Another aspect is insider-outsider dynamics, which are particularly pronounced among indigenous communities. In Modhupur, Mandi are welcome, as are ethnic minorities who do not generally fit that categorization, such as Hajong, Chakma, Marma, or other “indigenous people”. This also includes Hindu Mandai people. Bengalis have a more difficult time, and particularly those “making business”. While a poor immigrant family looking for a small plot of land to establish a homestead and performing day agricultural labor may not generate suspicion, those coming to “make business” certainly do. That includes those who, by government connections or by buying lands from Mandis, have set up profitable agricultural enterprises, but it also includes those working for NGOs and related organizations.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, there are a finite number of project ideas and sites marketable to donors and their intermediaries at any given development moment. What is fundable or fashionable today may be obsolete and uninteresting next year, or even sooner. What is a frequent cause of suspicion, then, and came into play in Asif and Deepa’s case, was the defense of territories of work seen as currently lucrative.

Indeed, threat to work territories is one of the central ways I read my own incorporation into the climate of suspicion.

Myself in the Climate of Suspicion

Nearer to the end of my fieldwork in Modhupur, I was staying at the Catholic Mission in Pirgacha. Most mornings during that period, I would eat breakfast with Father Bergman and Brother Eugenio, who was also living in one of the church's hostels and teaching in the Church's school. Although I disagreed with Father Bergman's racialization of what he saw as Bangladesh's problems, we had a cordial relationship. I acknowledged that he had led a long life in Bangladesh, and was from two generations prior to myself and therefore coming out of racial politics of that era, would tend to find it acceptable to view Bangladesh's shortcomings along racial lines. He was also a missionary, and was generally part of the premise of the *mission civilatrice*. With that said, he was also a much-loved and revered figure in the area, primarily for the work that he had done in establishing reliable medical care and schools in the Modhupur area, something for which the Mandi generally could not count on the government. And the approach he, his staff, and other Mandis generally described to me was one of some degree of encouragement of Mandi social structure and cultural practices, insofar as they didn't conflict with the religion he upheld. Although his "defense of his flock" was somewhat condescending in its paternalism, Bergman repeatedly emphasized to me that his goal was a Mandi self-sustaining mission, to be continued without much interference on the part of outside priests and bishops when he finally left or passed away.

As we were gathering for an evening meal one night, James, from Minority and Environment Group, arrived. I knew he had been in the area, showing a group of college students his medicinal plants project and journalistic endeavors, and had contacted him earlier that day to see if we could meet and I could accompany them. He had responded that he would be quite busy, but would try to stop by the Mission later.

James did stop by, and charged into the dining room, and enacted an entire performance which, thinking it was merely somewhat bizarre behavior at the time, I later understood was an attempt to shame me. I introduced James to Brother Eugenio, but he merely swiftly flew about the room, snatching fruit and other small food items, and making comments under his breath about just “going ahead and taking what he wanted”. This was James’s attempt at alluding to what he perceived as my behavior relative to his work – that I was a thief of his ideas and plans, taking what I wanted from MEG and usurping his research.

We invited James to stay for dinner, but he said he would just take what he needed and leave. He had a group of students waiting for him in the courtyard of the Mission, and he had to be on his way.

After James left, Father Bergman told me that I should exercise caution in dealing with James. In fact, he confessed, James had just come into his office and asked him why he was “harboring such a man, such a thief,” as myself. I would later discover that James had been making such allegations to many of his employees at MEG as well.

What James was referring to by accusing me of theft was left purely to my speculation. I had borrowed a book or two from MEG’s library, but returned them in a

reasonable amount of time. James had gifted to me a set of several of MEG's publications years ago. I had contributed several articles to MEG, one of which they had published in a major edited volume, and never even requested compensation. I had known James for years, and had always considered him something of a friend, or at least friendly acquaintance, and someone with whom I shared many views, despite my critique of his publications' participation in a neo-primitivist rendering of adivasi-environment issues.

The only thing I could muster was that James somehow had gotten the impression that his long-term investment in Modhupur as a site for research and advocacy, and as a budding site for his new medicinal plants nursery, was threatened by my work in the area. Perhaps through my friendships with Asif Uddin and with one of his journalistic staff had nurtured a theory that I was conspiring to start such a nursery myself, or undertake publication about Modhupur which rivaled his own?

Yet beyond speculation about the details of James's suspicion toward me, I read James's suspicion as part of a larger "climate of suspicion" I have been hinting toward throughout the dissertation, and especially in this chapter. Modhupur is a site of great intensity of this climate of suspicion for a number of reasons, which should be apparent at this point. In a Bangladesh with alarming little remaining forest cover, the dwindling Modhupur area is a site fraught with competing interests in how to use the "forest", both as a tangible resource and as a symbolic resource. In not only development, but human rights and environmentalist work as well, many areas and issues in Bangladesh are rife with intense competition for resources, particularly grant funding and accompanying jobs. The forest can mean not only a potential site for woodlot plantation, rubber

plantation, banana and pineapple plantation, or logging of old growth forest, but also of symbolic and cultural capital in terms of environmental conservation or marketing of tourism, to be utilized by environmental NGOs or government. Sites like Modhupur are also often invested into the idea of Bangladesh as a nation, as part of its value. Farid and Atif, the two forest guards discussed in Chapter 4, talked about understanding forest department conservation training programs through the lens of hearing about the beauty and value of Modhupur Forest in early experiences in school. And nearly all of the eight young Climate Champions I interviewed referenced the value of nature, environment, and forests by alluding to pride in the nation of Bangladesh.

Further complicating the potential value and futures of Modhupur as a forest space are the adivasis who live there. The Mandi, the primary subject of this dissertation, have their own views about the value of the forest, and are also participant in these debates about how the forest is to be deployed. While from a larger development and environmentalist context, the Mandi often appear as bodies and “livelihoods” to be managed and shaped by larger agendas, the on-the-ground realities detailed in this dissertation show the Mandi as vitally participant in the making of their own futures and the future of the forest. Where development, human rights, and environmental agendas all often become frustrated are where the Mandi continuously assert their own agendas and agency in making and negotiating these futures. Where an environmental agenda may render the Mandi as spiritually connected to trees, they may cut and sell them as a way of getting by; where a human rights agenda might insist they hold tight to their ambiguously-tenured land, they may lease to Bengali investors as a way to support their

children's' education in Dhaka; where a development agenda may demand they convert to medicinal plant cultivation, they may prefer to work salary jobs in beauty parlors and NGOs; and where anthropologists or indigenous cultural preservationists may wish the Mandi to speak Mandi and engage in Sangsarek practices, they may speak Bengali and embrace Christianity. And on the ground, these debates are constantly realized in the proactive interventions and appropriations Mandis make in the larger forces in which they are enmeshed.

This is the larger context in which I read my incorporation into Modhupur's climate of suspicion, as well as James's, Asif's, Father Bergman's, and Deepa's. It must be emphasized, however, how our very different positionalities and power positions relative to this climate render each of us quite disparately affected by it. Our various levels of connection to forms of cultural and social capital render some of us far less, and others of us far more, vulnerable to the enormous shifts of agendas and swings of fate of such a climate.

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Vita

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