

# Towards a Mobile Indigeneity?

## The Case of Indigenous Students from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis was to examine how increased mobility of indigenous student migrants in Dhaka from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh affects notions of belonging and indigeneity. By applying a theoretical framework of mobility, global interconnectedness and lifestyle the study challenged representations by indigenous rights advocates of indigenous people as inherently immobile and rooted in peripheral lands. The findings are based on two periods of fieldwork in Dhaka from June through August 2014 and from February through March 2015, during which I employed participant observation and held thirty-eight interviews with indigenous students. The data collected illustrate the need to rethink indigenous identities and activism and to acknowledge indigenous identity against the backdrop of social change and increasing access to global imaginaries in Bangladesh. The study particularly demonstrates how demands for cultural recognition, as often put forward by indigenous advocates, are problematic due to their neglect of representation issues and class differences among indigenous people. Furthermore, the mobility experiences and aspirations of indigenous students challenge popular, activist and scholarly representations of indigeneity as static, unchangeable and rooted in peripheral lands.

*Keywords: Bangladesh, indigeneity, Chittagong Hill Tracts, mobility.*

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Research problem**

In recent decades indigenous people from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Southeast Bangladesh have witnessed increased social and spatial mobility. This thesis investigates how indigenous students from the Chittagong Hill Tracts region who migrated to Dhaka redefine belonging and deal with an overall sense of social and existential insecurity as a result of increased mobility and their minority position in the country. Of particular interest here is how notions of belonging, particularly self-identification as indigenous people, are redefined as a result of increased mobility and global interconnectedness in Bangladesh. This study will investigate these processes by looking at mobility experiences and aspirations coming to the fore in education and lifestyle choices in the context of the mega-city Dhaka. The findings presented here are a result of two periods of fieldwork, from June through August 2014 and from February through March 2015.

An important impetus to social transformations in Bangladesh in recent decades has been provided by the drastic restructuring of the national economy, particularly the development of the garment industry (Ishtiaque & Ullah 2013), which has been a pull factor for urbanization. This development has led the urban population to increase with 3.5% annually (Lewis 2011: 163). Dhaka is the main recipient of these migrants which has resulted in the city becoming one of the top 20 mega-cities in the world, creating challenges in managing urbanization processes more effectively.

During this social and economic transformation, fierce public and academic debates have taken place over different interpretations of Bangladesh's past, particularly around issues of national identity and what defines being Bangladeshi, with the role of being ethnic Bengali and being Muslim as on-going points of contention (e.g. Mohsin 2002, Van Schendel 2009). In these debates non-Bengali and non-Muslim minorities have often been marginalized. However, scholars have attempted to illustrate diversity in the country by revealing how minorities have been alienated from the nationalist project (Bal 2007, Chowdury 2010, Uddin 2011).

The on-going integration of indigenous people in the increasingly globalized economy and the exclusion of these people in meta-narratives of belonging have led to a gap in understanding of how indigenous groups navigate urban environments. To close this gap, this study examines how indigenous student migrants relate to local, national and global imaginaries to find answers to ontological questions while at the same time examining the

role localized discourses of indigenous rights activists play in finding these answers. This way challenging dominant understandings of indigenous identities in Bangladesh as immobile, unchangeable and rooted in peripheral lands (Gerharz 2014).

In order to ensure the reader has a progressive understanding of the topic, this chapter continues with a section that illustrates the relevance of this study for debates on indigenous recognition and representation. This is followed by a general background to the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the presentation of the research questions. The second chapter presents the theoretical framework of indigenous mobilities by revealing the importance of global interconnectedness and mobility in enhancing understandings of contemporary indigenous identity. In chapter three, the methodology is presented, clarifying the methods applied, providing a background to the research participants and a discussion of relevant ethical considerations. Chapter four and five present the mobilities and mobile aspirations of indigenous students in Dhaka by illustrating the importance of education, livelihoods aspirations, lifestyles, foreign aspirations and consumption. Finally, chapter six presents the conclusions of the study pertaining to mobility of indigenous students in Dhaka while relating their experiences to contemporary debates on diversity in Bangladesh and illustrating how the case at hand provides insights in rethinking indigenous identities more broadly.

## **1.2 Relevance; contradictions in indigenous recognition and representation**

Increasingly ‘struggles for recognition’ are becoming a paradigmatic form of political conflict (Fraser 1995: 68). In South Asia these struggles have taken the form of a rise in identity politics through which people have been mobilizing along ethnic, religious and cultural lines, demanding recognition of what is perceived as their right to power in the nations they inhabit (Kymlicka & He 2005: 3). Consequently, demands for recognition of differences have led to the mobilization of groups under banners of nationality, ethnicity, gender and other classificatory lines. In these conflicts, cultural domination often supplants exploitation as the fundamental source of injustice and is put forward as a solution to injustice (Fraser 1995).

It is against this backdrop that indigenous rights advocates during the 1980s and 1990s successfully started to articulate their claims in human rights terms, particularly the right to culture (Engle 2011). As a result, indigenous peoples’ the world over have put forward indigenous claims in recent decades “in order to access the rights and political spaces accorded to them by international rights law” (Jung 2008: 184). These claims have led to

frictions not only between indigenous and non-indigenous populations but also among indigenous groups. This since indigenous activists make arguments that assume homogeneity of indigenous subjects, arguing that indigenous people have been marginalized for centuries, settler populations have stolen and colonized their lands, their numbers are in decline, cultures are threatened, and they live in states where the interests of nonindigenous populations are given more weight than those who are indigenous (Shah 2010: 9). Thus, these frictions are largely a result of the misrepresentation of indigenous groups as homogenous entities.

These representations cannot be seen separated from the ways in which the international indigenous rights movement has largely succeeded in placing the recognition of cultural rights for indigenous peoples within various international and regional law frameworks and institutions. As a result, issues of economic dependency and structural discrimination are largely neglected due to the reification of indigenous culture and the acceptance of a cultural rights framework by international institutions (Engle 2011). This way the international indigenous rights movement comfortably fits in neoliberal development and statehood models (Povinelli 2002).

In the South Asian context, indigenous activism has at times unintentionally further marginalized people since there are class dimensions to indigenous rights' movements that are often lost in cultural-based identity politics that such movements produce (Shah 2010). However, indigenous movements regularly oppose strategies affecting class based inequalities, opting for recognition to acquire self-determination rights as a community instead. Susana Devalle for example has located "the myth of the tribe" as produced by ignoring internal differentiation and failing to eradicate class divisions among indigenous subjects (Devalle 1992). These studies illustrate the need to deconstruct understandings of indigenous people as undifferentiated, presenting indigenous subjects as a mass of simple cultivators exploited by non-indigenous (Corbridge 1988).

The preceding discussion is important for the case at hand since in Bangladesh discourses of indigeneity are closely related to the emergence of indigenous activism on a global scale. In Bangladesh, global activist networks have a significant impact on demands from the indigenous movement, providing additional legitimacy and an adaptation of the global language of indigeneity into local systems of meaning and the formation of a national movement (Gerharz 2014: 565). To clarify the role of global activists' networks on indigenous claims for recognition and the dilemmas of representation inherent in these claims I now briefly examine the United Nations (UN) framework that indigenous activists in

Bangladesh rely on in making claims for indigenous recognition.

Central to the UN framework is the UN declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in 2007, which is based on an understanding that emphasizes self-identification of indigenous subjects while identifying a need for indigenous identity to be accepted on a 'community level' (United Nations 2007). Furthermore, the declaration points to historical continuity, strong links to territories and distinct social, economic and political systems such as distinct language, culture and beliefs (IWGIA 2014). Due to this broad description, the UN declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples leaves room for various interpretations of the concept of indigeneity.

In Bangladesh interpretations of what indigenous identity entails differ between indigenous activists who interpret the working definition of indigenous peoples as denoting 'prior inhabitants', and consecutive Bangladeshi governments who work on the basis of an understanding of indigenous people as 'original inhabitants', which is much broader in application (Gerharz 2014). As a result, the government generally refers to ethnic Bengalis as the original inhabitants of Bangladesh and denies the existence of indigenous people besides Bengalis, making recognition of indigenous people in the country 'irrelevant' since Bengali Bangladeshis are a majority in the country and since its secession from Pakistan do not experience marginalization as a result of their Bengaliness (Yasmin 2014).

Another limitation of both the UN framework and local activist movements is that indigenous people who migrate to cities are denied indigenous claims, both in terms of indigenous as a category of belonging and the interlinked entitlements such a claim demands. This since both the U.N. and local activists (the distinction is not always clear) continue to stress ties to land which makes those migrating to cities "inauthentic" and "not real" indigenous people, placing their concerns largely outside the domain of activists concerns (see for example Merlan 2007). Further frictions exist in Bangladesh since activists within the indigenous movement in Bangladesh rely on globalised rhetoric and local knowledge at the same time blurring internal distinctions.

In addition, well-educated Bangladeshis are more and more integrated into the movement, providing links to elites, decision makers in politics, and to other transnational networks. Problematic is that these transnational activist networks conceptualise indigenous as constituting trans local spaces while making use of essentialist categories in their understanding of what indigenous is about. This has increasingly led to frictions between well-meaning activists and the people they seek to represent (Gerharz 2014).

In the theoretical framework in chapter two I examine indigenous identity and

demands for indigenous recognition by positioning the concepts in debates on mobility and global interconnectedness in order to be able to account for the increasing migration of indigenous people to major urban centers. At the same time it is important to take into consideration that indigenous peoples experience alienation from Bangladeshi nationalism (Karim 1998, Mohsin 2002, Yasmin 2014), indigenous peoples' are considered to be aversive to state control (Scott 2009) and that mobility of indigenous groups is increasingly influenced by the state and market, which these groups have little control over (Lund 2014).

### **1.3 Tracing the construction of difference in the Chittagong Hill Tracts**

Debates central to indigenous recognition have a longer history than the recent popularity of the transnational indigenous rights movement in previous decades. In the context of South Asia the debates relevant here date back to the colonial era when British anthropologists started using classifications of tribal and aboriginal, illustrating the need to examine how these classifications were put to use to reconstruct social worlds in South Asia (Dirks 2003, Pannikar 2007). In these colonial discourses of difference, the way in which status became inscribed in physical exteriors of colonial subjects has contributed to stereotypes in the present (Bal 2007). People classified as tribal or aboriginal were described in texts and treated by administrations as living in timeless harmony with nature, disturbed only in recent times by the market and the state (Shah 2010). The ways in which these classifications were made more important than previously has had a lasting impact in Bangladesh, by influencing contemporary perceptions in Bangladesh of indigenous people as 'exotic', 'tribal people' which resemble romanticising images of the noble savage during colonialism (Bal 2007).

In the case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, or CHT as the region will be called henceforth, a crucial series of events influencing the construction of difference took place in the year 1860 when the British colonial administration penetrated the region and introduced state institutions, including central taxation and a land system (Chakma 2010). In addition, the British sought to cut off the region from bordering areas, this way limiting the otherwise self-evident flow of migration and cultural influence between plains and hills which led the region's inhabitants to form a largely separate identity (Van Schendel 1992) while classifying themselves based on a form of racial anthropology as described above.

During partition in 1947 the British assigned the CHT to East-Pakistan<sup>1</sup> instead of India (Raghavan 2013). This allocation was made despite requests from local leaders to be

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<sup>1</sup> In 1971 East Pakistan would secede from Pakistan after a bloody liberation war and become Bangladesh

assigned on the basis of religious classifications applied elsewhere, since a large majority of the inhabitants of the tracts were Buddhists, Hindus and animists at that time (Yasmin 2014). This made the allotment to Pakistan contradict the primary principle of Partition of allotting areas to Pakistan; that of being a Muslim majority constituency (Karim 1998: 306). After being assigned to Pakistan, the countries' government treated the region as hostile towards the Pakistani state. This led to the implementation of a policy of integration, or rather assimilation, of the CHT into the rest of the country by allowing migration from the Bengal plains to the tracts, a practice prohibited during colonial rule (Mohsin 2002). This policy would have an unmistakable influence on the future of the area and changed the demographics of the region rapidly from then onwards as a result of government stimulation of large scale migration from the Bengal plains to the CHT. This increased the pressure on the availability of fertile land in the region and created further tensions between groups (Karim 1998: 306-307).

Another defining moment in the CHT's recent history is 1971, when East-Pakistan seized to exist and Bangladesh came into being after a violent liberation war fought with the Pakistani army. The independence movement for Bangladesh was mainly driven by an inferior position of Bengalis within the Pakistani state since West-Pakistani authorities purposely used 'tactics to weaken the Bengali "race"' (Lewis 2011: 71). This made the independence movement revolve particularly around challenging the inferior position of Bengalis in Pakistan. As a result, aspects of what was seen as Bengali culture, such as Bengali language, literature and music, became crucial points of contention. In an attempt to build a new state it is unsurprising that aspects of Bengali culture became central in constructing a Bangladeshi identity. However, in its attempt to create a national community an imagined community was constructed that was almost exclusively based on the assumption of an ethnically (Bengali) and religiously (Muslim) homogenous entity. In the process excluding inhabitants that did not fit the ethnic and religious mold forced upon them (Van Schendel 2009). The failure to incorporate minority groups and the marginalization this brought about was bestowed upon the sizeable Hindu population, as well as the approximately forty-five indigenous groups that comprise approximately two million people in Bangladesh (AIPP 2009). Among these, thirteen groups numbering around half a million people live in the CHT. The largest group among these are the Chakma numbering around 375,000 according to the census in 2001 (Rahman 2010), other relatively numerous indigenous groups in the CHT are the Tripura and Marma communities.

In the initial years after the creation of Bangladesh in the early seventies, the main

markers of belonging to the new nation became being an ethnic Bengali, due to suppression during the Pakistan era and since over 95% of the new nation's population is ethnic Bengali (Van Schendel 2009). Although initially a secular state ideology was adopted soon, after a failed experiment with secularism, Islam became a more important marker for Bangladeshi identity (Hassan 2011). This was partially a result of the way in which military regimes started to use the idioms of religion to create legitimacy for their rule, which was crucial to distract attention from the way they monopolized power and looted public resources (Haque Khondker 2010). Furthermore the increasing importance of religion in nation building can be interpreted as a correction of a neglect of the role of Islam in the lives of many outside the secular urban elites where Islam had for a long time been an important part of day-to-day life (Robinson 2008).

At the same time, by adopting policies to increase centralization and enhance government control over peripheral regions, accompanied by the growth of industry in Dhaka and improved infrastructure, state control over the CHT was increased. However, most inhabitants of the CHT did not benefit from these developments since there were barely any state facilities available to the local population. This neglect, while pressure on land increased due to government sponsored migration from landless Bengali plains, and the construction of a hydro-electric dam project at Kaptai in the CHT, completed in 1962, had major implications for the relation between local leaders and the state. This since the dam project displaced approximately 100,000 indigenous people, primarily Chakmas (Chakma 2010, Karim 1998, Van Schendel 1992: 11). At the same time Bangladeshi nationalism increasingly adopted ethnic Bengaliness and Islam as pillars of Bangladeshi nationalism (Mohsin 2002), making feelings of alienation and marginalization rise to new highs, further fueling the antagonistic relationship between indigenous groups from the CHT and the Bangladeshi state. This eventually culminated in military conflict in 1975 when war erupted between the Bangladeshi army and a military wing of the main political organization the PCJSS<sup>2</sup> called the Shanti Bahini (Chowdury 2008: 66). This low-intensity war would claim around 125,000 victims over two decades before a peace accord was signed in 1997 (Levine 1999: 340). At present however, the CHT region is still heavily militarized since the peace accord has never been fully implemented and lower level political support for the accord is lacking. As a result

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<sup>2</sup> PCJSS stands for Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (Bangla পার্বত্য চট্টগ্রাম জনসংহতি সমিতি) or in English the United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts is a political party from the CHT which attempts to gain more autonomy for the CHT region and its indigenous population. Its military arm, the Shanti Bahini fought the Bangladeshi government in the CHT war between 1975 and 1997

human rights violations are still a regular occurrence in the CHT (Amnesty International 2014, Human Rights Watch 2013).

The process of student migration from the CHT and students adaptation in Dhaka cannot be understood without understanding the history and present situation of indigenous groups from the CHT in Bangladesh<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the relevance of indigenous discourses and the urgency of indigenous claims to land and self-determination rights should be understood in light of the increased pressure on land and resources in the CHT and the violence experienced by people in the CHT. These all played a prominent role in participants' narratives and their migration decisions. Furthermore, the position the CHT has taken in the Bangladeshi national imaginary and the role British, Pakistani and Bangladeshi institutions played in the regions' history is important to understand the ways in which indigenous students in Dhaka find answers to existential questions of belonging. Particularly since interaction with institutions has transformed underlying cultural-valuational structures and affected the place of indigenous identities and traditions in day-to-day life as well as interpretations of Bangladesh's past and the role of Bengali culture in daily life. This in turn has reshaped identities by altering notions of belonging, both in the CHT and the remainder of Bangladesh.

#### **1.4 Political violence in Bangladesh**

At present the political landscape in Bangladesh is dominated by two political parties, the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh National Party (BNP). These political institutions have a highly antagonistic relationship which regularly paralyses the political process and destabilizes the economy (Lewis 2011: 20). As a result, politics in Bangladesh have become increasingly divisive and polarized between secular, religious and geopolitical identities, resulting in rising tensions between different segments of society (Ollapally 2008: 177). Against this backdrop hartals, or nation-wide strikes that involve street violence, are a regular occurrence. Generally, hartals are called for in the months prior to general elections and are used as political currency. They are often interpreted as a result of the winner-takes-all politics in contemporary Bangladesh which leaves opposition parties little room to manoeuvre (Islam & Suykens 2013). During the 2<sup>nd</sup> period of fieldwork in early 2015, the country was in a constant state of hartals because the BNP opposition party perceived the

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<sup>3</sup> For a more elaborate history of the region and its integration in the nation state see Amena Mohsin's *The Politics of Nationalism; the Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Bangladesh* and Deepak K. Singh's *Stateless in South Asia : The Chakmas Between Bangladesh and India*.

general elections in 2014 as illegitimate. In an attempt to regain political power, the party leadership regularly called for hartals in order to challenge their unfavourable position in national politics. These hartals regularly prevented participants from attending university and made it dangerous for them to travel back and forth to the CHT since buses, if even available, could become subject to attacks with petrol bombs by political activists enforcing the hartal. This situation also had an effect on participants since lectures and exams were cancelled. In addition, my roommates during the second period of fieldwork in early 2015 were planning to spend several weeks at their hometown of Khagrachari in the CHT to see family and friends. This trip was cancelled due to the attacks on buses on the highway from Dhaka to Chittagong, the main road from Dhaka to the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

## **1.5 Research questions**

The purpose of the thesis is to examine the ways in which mobility is aspired and experienced by indigenous students from the CHT in Dhaka. At the same time the study reveals the falseness of static views of indigenous people in Bangladesh and emphasizes social change among indigenous people and in Bangladesh more broadly by documenting access to new lifestyles and its influence on contemporary understandings of indigeneity.

The research question for this study is:

*How does increased mobility of indigenous student migrants in Dhaka from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and their access to global imaginaries, affects notions of belonging and indigeneity?*

With the following sub questions:

- 1. In which ways do indigenous student migrants from the CHT experience increased mobility?*
- 2. How do indigenous student migrants from the CHT in Dhaka redefine notions of belonging, primarily to indigenous identities?*
- 3. How do global images and the accessibility of new lifestyles in Dhaka affect processes of self-identification among indigenous student migrants from the CHT in Dhaka?*

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Mobile indigeneity as a framework**

Indigenous communities propagating indigenous rights collaborate with NGO's such as the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, Survival International and Human Rights Watch, and have urged for indigenous rights to lands and resources. The form these collaborations have taken has at times led to further marginalization of the people for whom demands are claimed to be made since "the class dimension of the indigenous rights movement is likely to get erased in the cultural-based identity politics it produces" (Shah 2010: 12). In addition, the notion of indigenous allows room for orderings of the social world according to claims of blood and soil (Beteille 1998). However, at the same time indigenous identity has become part of peoples' day-to-day life around the world denoting a sense of belonging replacing place-based bonds with homogenized national imaginaries indigenous people are often excluded from (Yasmin 2014). In this theoretical framework I explore how to go beyond the class based representation of indigenous groups. In order to do so I apply a mobility framework as useful to counter the cultural-based identity politics inherent in indigenous debates (Shah 2010) due to its strength of revealing movement up or down in the hierarchy of socio-economic classes. This way a mobilities framework brings together the social concerns of inequalities and hierarchies while taking into account the cultural concerns of representation (Sheller 2014). Another reason for the applicability of mobility here is that it carries powerful connotations that counter illusions of stationary life which breaks with the insularity of the local (Skrbis, Woodward & Bean 2013). The approach here is thus an attempt to raise issues of representation and an urge to pay attention to voices not usually heard in academic scholarship and activist discourses on indigenous identities. Furthermore, by focussing on indigenous students, a different class of indigenous subjects is revealed since students in Dhaka are mostly from middle and higher classes from the CHT. This is important since studies on indigenous identity and advocates for indigenous recognition in Bangladesh almost solely focus on lower classes and people practising subsistence agriculture (Uddin 2012) or focus on indigenous peoples links to land (Chowdury 2008, Gain 2000). Instead, this study applies concepts that enhance understandings of how indigenous people make sense of the world around them by examining the importance of global interconnectedness, education and lifestyle as markers of mobility.

## **2.2 Mobility; a theoretical reflection**

Migration entails exposure to new ideas, places and practices and a different everyday lived experience (Gardner 1993, Zeitlyn 2006). This way migration illustrates not only the heterogeneity of populations, but also reveals elements of cultural mixing and hybridity, breaking down categories of othering while recognizing different pathways for mobility (Rao 2014: 872). In this thesis mobility allows for a more thorough conceptualization of migration across physical space and place as a dynamic process imbedded in power and meaning, taking into account agency and the fluidity of shaping identities and aspirations (Massey 1994). Mobility refigures interpretations of culture, tradition and modernity, particularly in its understanding of class relations (Rao 2014). This acknowledgement is important since when examining mobility possibilities and aspirations, awareness of mobility as contextually and structurally conditioned is necessary since some are better placed than others to benefit from mobility opportunities (Skribis, Woodward & Dean 2013: 615).

For Creswell (1999), mobilities relate to power and an awareness of structures of domination and resistance. This since mobility and the potential for mobility are central to unequal power structures (Kaufmann 2002). Recently, against the backdrop of globalization, mobility has emerged in social sciences as a critique on contradictory orientations of sedentarism and de-territorialisation, enabling the researcher to look at movements and forces that drive and produce those movements (Sheller & Urry 2006). Particularly since the concept of mobility encompasses a wide set of movements of people, objects and information as well as processes of transportation, movement through public space and the travel of material objects in everyday life (Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006).

Postcolonial theory and critical theories of race have applied mobilities to rethink the performative politics of racial difference and how difference justifies unequal mobility opportunities. Sheller has illustrated how uneven “mobility capital” (Sheller 2014) is central in understanding processes of globalization and place-specific demobilization. Uneven distribution of mobility capital can be perceived as a result of the uneven distribution of physical, social, and political affordances for movement (Kaufmann et al. 2004). This way mobility cuts across spaces while practices of spatial (horizontal) displacements are often entwined with experiences of self-identity (vertical) displacement (D’Andrea 2006: 106).

These insights from debates on mobilities are largely absent in indigenous debates since indigenous people have been assumed to embody the essence of the human desire to be rooted in certain lands, which is related to the notion of “sons of the soil” (see Malkki 1992).

With the global rise of indigenous rights in recent decades, migration and globalization have been represented as violent because it assumes to threaten the authenticity of indigenous people as rooted in their lands (Appadurai 1988). These politics function to simultaneously exclude outsiders and primordialize insiders (Shah 2010: 137). A focus on mobility experiences and aspirations of indigenous peoples is thus essential to counter representations of indigenous as inherently immobile and to reveal contemporary change among indigenous people.

In Bangladesh, increased movement between geographical spaces has contributed to economic and social mobility. Relevant here is the notion of “going beyond” (Bhabha 1994) which denotes progress and promises for the future and stands for a desire of recognition. This at the same time requires one to cross a boundary into something unknowable and uncertain. As a result, one does not become disjointed, rather engagement in global and national cultures opens up a space where cultures can be renegotiated, allowing for appropriation and translation of existing hierarchical structures (ibid.).

### **2.3 Global interconnectedness**

Taking into account mobility of indigenous peoples and the role of global interconnectedness requires an adjustment of images of indigenous subjects as inherently immobile and rooted in remote, isolated lands. The dynamics of globalization, indigenous identity, mobility and social transformation that come together in this thesis affect the structuring of the process of social fabrics and geographical space which in turn is due to recently made available access to communication and transport facilities (Ohnmacht, Maksin & Bergman 2009).

Neither mobility nor migration is merely a product of the recent wave of increased global interconnectedness. Trade, exchange and migration have rather been a norm of human history (Wolf 1982). Presently however, migration is often depicted in line with the static nature of nationalist discourses in which people are imagined as living in the same place. As a result, migration appears as a disruption of the norm (Malkki 1992). To counter the notion of migration as a disruption I apply global interconnectedness as a referent to the intensification of transnational flows that deterritorialize communities while interconnecting them globally by taking into account the growing importance of trans-local connections in the shaping of social life. I therefore examine the intensification of social, economic, political, technological and cultural processes that interrelate with one another (D’Andrea 2006: 10) and the increased interconnectedness of the world (Croucher 2004). Furthermore, by

examining how everyday life is permeated by transnational flows, the way in which existential dimensions of the social world are altered for individuals are revealed (Giddens 1991).

Acknowledging the links between mobility, migration and globalization enhances understandings of a mobile indigeneity since migration is informed by aspirations of mobility and imaginations and constructions of selves and worlds, and how people from different backgrounds use these in their day-to-day lives (Appadurai 1996). This way, mobilities research is often linked to the notion of globalization. Here Appadurai's (1996) notion of scapes can be applied to mobility systems, making mobility as much informational as infrastructural. This holds particularly for the ways in which 'technoscapes' and 'mediascapes' create new affordances for people to navigate public places and access social environments, generating new forms of urban life (Sheller 2014: 799). Technoscapes particularly connect people and places, while informational technologies, such as social media, Skype and mobile phones, make space-time dichotomies increasingly collapse.

## **2.4 Mobility and education**

Education is a crucial way of accumulating cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) and plays a significant role in social mobility by improving individuals' socio-economic circumstances and reducing poverty (Nath 2012: 50). In Bangladesh, educational choices are often made based on assessments of providing alternative livelihood options and to which extend the chosen path of education can function as a pathway for mobility (Rao & Hossain 2012: 416).

In South Asia however, the poor state of government funded education has resulted in low accumulation of skills and capital and does not provide significant opportunities for economic advancement (Ahmed & Govinda 2010). Here a class dimension exists since in Bangladesh, poor, working class children, particularly from rural areas, underachieve throughout their education compared to middle and upper classes (Rao 2014: 874). In addition, location is important since education in remote areas, such as the CHT, consistently underperforms compared to schools in urban centres (Ahmed et al. 2005). This makes migration for educational purposes an important way to achieve mobility (Rao & Hossain 2011)

For students migrating to Dhaka access to higher education is probably the most important way of achieving social mobility. This since formal education and a completed study at a public or private university in Bangladesh enables, justifies and reproduces social

mobility and provides a sense of future security in the country (Rao & Hossain 2012). Higher education is also about learning how to function effectively in a globalized livelihood context since there are (re)productions of power and domination at work in social and cultural contexts that mediate the relationship between the local and global. In addition, since learning is socially constructed, materially produced, and morally regulated, it carries symbolic significance, influencing the construction of a person's identity and feelings of belonging to certain groups and classes (Rao & Hossain 2012: 417).

In conclusion, by looking at mobility and education, power structures are revealed and insights are gained into how to transform structures in order to understand the renegotiation of identities due to a separation of home and a community linked to it (Valentin 2012). This relates to the core tension in this thesis as to what constitutes indigenous identity and how identity formations are interrelated with social change and movement.

## **2.5 Lifestyle**

In contemporary Bangladesh, traditions are no longer all-encompassing since people have access to alternative notions of belonging (Zeitlyn, Janeja & Mapril 2014). Increased global interconnectedness has resulted in possibilities for people to consume images and locate themselves in complex identities of nationalism, religion, indigeneity and consumerism. For migrants, the politics of adaptation to new environments and the stimuli to move or return are deeply affected by global imaginaries produced by mass media (Appadurai 1996). In addition, in the Bangladeshi context, particularly in Dhaka, new lifestyle choices as well as globalised purchasing and consumption habits have emerged recently (Etzold 2013) while at the same time foreign countries have become symbols for things that young people cannot accomplish in Bangladesh (Gardner 2008). As a result, being local is increasingly associated with social deprivation and degradation since rural lifestyles are associated with peripheries and an 'under-developed' way of life in Bangladesh (Bal 2007).

Lifestyle is related to processes of mobility since migration for students is seen as key to outperforming previous generations. Lifestyle migration is defined by O'Reilly and Benson as the process of "mobility of relatively affluent individuals to locations that offer a better way of life" (O'Reilly & Benson 2009: 2). Although indigenous students' migration cannot be reduced to lifestyle migration, I would like to emphasise students' aspirations of accessing new lifestyles and the crucial role these play in mobility decisions. This since the aspiration of a better future life, and access to a worldly lifestyle, are important

considerations for students to come to Dhaka. This way the associations and images associated with urban lifestyles influence perceptions on migration. These understandings are related to notions of global elites who do not only have access to economic wealth but are also associated with a mobile lifestyle where being global is a normative ideal (Elliot & Urry: 2010). For migrants, in the context of globalization, moving to the city opens up alternate pathways for social mobility through engagements with consumption and consumerism (McDuié-Ra 2012). At the same time links to land remain crucial, not least because of the emphasis put by indigenous advocates on indigenous ties to land, making imaginations of an 'indigenous homeland' figure prominently in constructions of cultural and indigenous identities. It is this penetration of the local with imaginations of other places that is an important driving force to adapt to new urban environments and to explore new cultural fields which alter social realities.

This does not imply that all Bangladeshis have access to lifestyles associated with cosmopolitanism and the latest international fashion trends and consumer goods. It does mean that the availability of images has resulted in longings for lifestyles associated with consumerism, urbanism and cosmopolitanism (Etzold 2013). Consumption is important here since it partially erodes existing status hierarchies and opens up mobility spaces cutting across social positions (Skribis, Woodward & Bean 2013). Also, consumption is a key tool in producing the hybrid identity that mobility is regularly associated with. As a result, consumption opens up resource access and is useful to reveal status and processes of exclusion. Finally, commodities have social lives, having the power to mark social inequality, and can function as symbols of social success in achieving social mobility, for example in the transitional phase of being a student.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Ontology and epistemology**

Prior to the research design I reflect on my ontological and epistemological assumptions to illustrate how these influence the research process and design (Davies 1999). As a constructivist, I take the social world as crucial in understanding and interpreting the world around us. A central aspect of constructivism is its perception of reality as constantly constructed and reconstructed (Bryman 2012: 314). This thesis seeks to reveal how participants make sense of the world around them by examining issues that are in situ

methodologically, in that I seek to rely as much as possible on participants perspectives and actions in regard to the issues at hand (Creswell 2007: 20). However the emphasis on constructivism and interpretivism should not be read as a neglect of the influence of structure on agency. Rather I understand social life as the outcome of the interaction of agency and structure, making it necessary to take into account the impact of structure and its influence on social classifications, and vice versa, in participants' lives. It is as a result of its suitability as a methodology to interpret how knowledge is produced and shared through socialization (Charmaz 2006) that I have chosen ethnographic methods as a research design.

### **3.2 Research design**

Ethnographic research has famously been described by Willis & Trondman in the first edition of the journal *Ethnography* as “a methodology that draws on a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and on richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing, at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience” (Willis & Trondman 2000: 5). Ethnographic research is thus an engagement in the lives of participants where the researcher is always to some degree connected to the object of study (Davies 1999). This since the purpose of ethnographic research is to reveal the complexity of people and the life's they create, and to illustrate the social and cultural conditions that shape them (Cohen 2002). This thesis, as an end product of ethnographic research, draws primarily on data from fieldwork experiences. Due to this dependence I acknowledge and utilize my subjective experience as part of the project. I therefore find it important to include some remarks on reflexivity in applying ethnographic methods.

Reflexivity is a process of self-reference through which the characteristics of the researcher influence the research process (Davies 1999: 5). This relates both to my personal facts, for example being a white European and male student and to my subjective position i.e. my personal experiences and life history, which affect my research interests. During the research process I adopted a constantly reflexive stance toward my positions and how these influenced participants and my own interpretations of participants' behaviour. I hope the reader is made aware of these reflections throughout the text, primarily in the material presented in the data discussion chapters. Since one of the main goals of my methodology is to provide insight in the lives of research participants I have selected participant observation and semi-structured interviews as methods. I now briefly provide more information about

these methods and my application of them.

### *Participant observation*

Central to the chosen methodology is to obtain insight in how research participants experience day-to-day lives, making it important for the researcher to allow oneself to become immersed in the day-to-day lives of participants (Creswell 2007: 68). One of the main benefits of this approach is that through the perception and embodied experience the researcher works towards increasingly shared conceptual categories and an enhanced sociality (Barth 2000: 25). This dual benefit of participant observation can only come into existence by spending a considerable amount of time with a social group (Herbert 2000: 551). To this end, I lived with participants and accompanied them and participated in daily activities such as cooking, playing sports, and travelling, among other activities, during the two fieldwork periods.

During both research visits I adopted participant observation as a key methodological tool by learning from participant's everyday lives and experiences (O'Reilly 2012: 86). Furthermore participant observation proved crucial to gain insight into mobilities of participants since the method is useful to take into account mobile subjectivities, lifestyles and identities (D'Andrea 2006: 115). By analysing social interactions, forms of subjectivity and sociality as well as the categories that frame student experiences and interpretations of being indigenous have been taken into account. Through participant observation I was able to describe and interpret patterns of behaviour and beliefs (Alvesson & Skjoldberg 2009: 84). This has the advantage that not only what people say is documented but also what they actually do (Herbert 2000: 552).

### *Interviews*

Ethnographic interviews usually take the form of a guided conversation. For these to be trustful, ethical and sensitive I was initially not actively arranging interviews since questioning and listening first take place within everyday conversation (O'Reilly 2012: 116-128). I preferred to do interviews after I had met participants several times so that trust was established, allowing the interviews to have a collaborative character instead of being merely interrogative. As a result I held five interviews during the first period of fieldwork, although I had many conversations with participants about wide ranging topics. During the 2nd period of fieldwork I conducted thirty-three semi-structured interviews consisting of open questions to gain deeper understanding in what participants meant with certain expressions and

concepts, and to provide information about their experiences (Stone Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater 2007: 76-78). Interviews had various lengths of between twenty and ninety minutes. The semi-structured nature of these interviews allowed me to explore ideas while receiving fixed responses on certain topics. Before the start of every interview I ensured that participants understood what the interview was for and what my research was about. During these I used a topic list to allow myself flexibility while covering all the topics I wanted to know more about. The structure of the interviews was such that I started with asking for general information including age, family, parents' education level, upbringing, and migration to Dhaka, progress in their studies as well as part-time jobs, career prospects, friends and connections to the CHT. I would also ask about encounters in Dhaka with other Bangladeshi's and problems of adapting to life in the city to find out more about the experiences of students with stereotypes regarding their appearance. After learning more about participants' backgrounds I would create room for participants to tell me more about themselves. This would often result in conversations about difficulties faced in the city and obstacles to what participants would call 'moving forward' or 'achieving something in life'. These open-end guided parts of the interviews form the backbone of the data discussions in chapter four and five. In addition to interviews I often arranged follow-up conversations when I wanted to know more about a certain topic or learn more about certain events. This was particularly the case with my three roommates and their friends during the 2nd fieldwork period, and for several people I met for talks during the first fieldwork period. With many of these people I was able to schedule an interview during the second period of fieldwork.

### **3.3 Research participants**

Participants in this study are students who identify themselves as indigenous and who have migrated from the CHT to Dhaka. As discussed before, scholarship on indigenous people often focuses on marginalized sections of indigenous populations represented by upper and middle-class indigenous rights activists, often with an indigenous background. By acknowledging class divisions among indigenous subjects, this study seeks to provide a new lens and attempts to close the 'indigenous representation gap' by voicing concerns of indigenous people that do not fit the mould of indigenous identity put forward in activist discourses.

The students in this study are relatively well-off compared to same generation indigenous youngsters that cannot afford a study in a major city like Chittagong or Dhaka.

Almost all of them are from middle and higher classes in the CHT. Although many respondents faced financial problems, depressions and/or unemployment they had better future prospects than most of their peers in the CHT. All participants in this study are students living in Dhaka who for at least part of their upbringing lived in the CHT. Participants all came from one of the three different sub districts of the region. A large majority of approximately 90% of participants came from the districts of Khagrachari and Rangamati, less so from the Banderban district in the CHT. This is not so much a result of bias in the sample; rather it reflects the research population in Dhaka. Apart from belonging to different ethnic groups, the students varied greatly in their field of studies and the universities they attended. A narrow majority of participants studied at the two most prominent public universities in the greater Dhaka area: Dhaka University and Jahangirnagar University. Others attended one of the many public universities providing varying quality of education. Participants in this study are from various disciplinary backgrounds, although subjects such as economics and engineering were more common than others. This is however rather a reflection of perceived career opportunities and seems to reflect study choices in Bangladesh more broadly.

The indigenous students in this study all grew up in the CHT and came to Dhaka after finishing at least primary school. However, most respondents had only been in Dhaka for a few years or even shorter. Others had come to Dhaka to attend secondary school between their tenth and fourteenth birthday. For a great majority of respondents most of their family lived in the CHT, which resulted in regular travels to and from the region as well as regular phone calls with families and friends living in the region. This ensured a high level of connectedness to the region which was further enhanced due to family histories of violence, primarily but not exclusively, as a result of the CHT war which formally ended in 1997. In addition, many students in this thesis have witnessed communal violence during their upbringing in the region. From their perspective this violence was caused by Bengali settlers in the area, assisted by the Bangladeshi army. This is remarkable taking into consideration their present engagement in Bangladesh's capital and its state institutions. I will elaborate on this point in chapter five and six.

A challenge during fieldwork were patriarchal notions and gender roles in Bangladesh (Chowdury 2009), limiting access to female participants. However, since the women in this study went to university or joined the paid labour force, the often concealed processes of normativity and negotiation of gender roles were altered, making these women less restricted in their movement in public space (Feldman 2001). Since I lived in a male student household

we did not have female guests during both of my fieldwork periods. I overcame this challenge by actively seeking access to female participants through my network. This allowed me to meet and built trust with several female students in public spaces, arranging meetings through acquaintances at universities, parks and eateries.

### **3.4 Research sites**

The notion of ‘the field’ which is central in ethnographic studies has remained largely unaccounted for in contemporary scholarship that draws on fieldwork despite the notions’ centrality in intellectual projects (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). Subsequently, the taken for granted notion in ethnographic research of ‘the field’ has been left to common sense beyond the researcher’s reflexivity. In this thesis the field is interpreted not with a commitment to the local but with attentiveness to social and cultural location. This allows me to continuously shift and realign my fieldwork locations through its links with other locations. In following this interpretation, the study does not follow a strictly demarcated notion of the field that mainly serves to identify difference by constructing a notion of field as a segmentation of the world in which difference can be located, as has been the case in ethnographic accounts about indigenous peoples in the CHT in ‘natural’, ‘authentic’ conditions. I take locations as aspects of belonging, being discontinuous and multiple constructed rather than as a place (Kaplan 1996: 182-183). This way, locations themselves may offer clues to the politics of location and belonging. The locations in this study are thus relevant since they form a rejection of rootedness in a place by seeking to problematize the notion of place and the ethnographic field.

During fieldwork I adopted a multi-stranded methodology approach, focussing not on bounded fields but on shifting locations indexing the multiple entry points into participants’ lives (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). This means that I accompanied students in their daily lives when they would go shopping for food or clothes, when they went to university, parks, tea stalls, for an evening stroll or to play football. An important location is the neighbourhood of Mirpur where both apartments I lived in during the two fieldwork periods were located. Mirpur<sup>4</sup> is a popular destination for middle class migrants from the CHT due to its affordable housing and a flourishing indigenous community as a result of previous settlements. The area is home to several shops that import goods from the CHT, particularly food products, such as rice and dried fish, as well as clothing. Roughly two settlement patterns can be identified in

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<sup>4</sup> Mirpur is a middle class neighbourhood, although both relatively high-end luxury apartments and slums can be found in the area that is home to over a million residents

the area, one of new arrivals from the CHT and a second form of settlement by people that used to live in or around the city centre, but resettled northwards due to rising housing prices. These simultaneous settling processes make Mirpur a centre of middle class CHT migrants in Dhaka.

### **3.5 Research process and obstacles**

Since I have basic working knowledge in Bengali and do not master any of the indigenous languages spoken by participants I relied on English or translators in doing fieldwork. During many interviews, particularly with participants studying at top local universities, I was able to rely on English. This was possible since most studies at these institutions are taught in English and the students at these universities are fluent in the language or at least able to hold a conversation. In case language issues arose we often relied on the internet or a dictionary to clarify specific terms to one another.

During interviews with students from other mostly private universities<sup>5</sup>, I could not always rely on English. Fortunately I had access to a pool of four students that accompanied me as translators on different occasions depending on their availability. Working with these students worked well since I had worked with them several years before in 2012, which meant that they were familiar with my research methods and demands, like providing an exact translation and abstaining from suggestive probing. This way, earlier negative experiences with translators falling in the trap of suggestive probing were prevented.

### **3.6 Ethical considerations**

Throughout fieldwork participants were informed about the purpose of the research as well as to how the information would be disseminated, in the form of a thesis and possibly in a publicly available journal. All data presented in this paper is made anonymous in order to prevent harm done to participants. To this end, names of participants have been changed to pseudonyms.

Another ethical consideration is related to the present political situation in Bangladesh which is characterized by strong patron-client relationships (Van Schendel 2009: 215) while the human rights situation in the country is very bleak (Amnesty International 2014). This makes doing research in Bangladesh on politically sensitive issues an insecure undertaking. Since indigenous demands are not recognized by the Bangladeshi government I negotiated

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<sup>5</sup> such as National University, Green University and Daffodil International University among others.

this sensitivity by emphasizing the rural-urban migration aspect of my research when informing those that were not research participants about the research. This applied to people that did not belong to the research population and wanted to know more about my project. This way I prevented any harm done to research participants and myself.

The need for this negotiation became clear during the 2<sup>nd</sup> period of fieldwork when a new government order was implemented regarding the CHT which stated that all ‘foreigners’ needed to seek permission before visiting the area at least one month in advance. In addition, foreigners, also those working with NGO’s, required governmental ‘assistance’ in the form of army personnel, with them when meeting indigenous people in the region (Dailystar 2015). This order was protested widely in newspapers as well as by indigenous students, for example through a demonstration of indigenous students on February 16<sup>th</sup> 2015 at Dhaka University.

## **4. Imagined and experienced mobilities**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I examine imagined and experienced forms of mobilities and immobilities by indigenous students to defy fixed interpretations of being. In Bangladesh large scale rural-urban migration paired with major improvements in transport and communications have taken place in recent decades which has increased local and global information flows (Rao & Hossain 2012: 418, Lewis 2011: 165). From data collected, these developments have led to access to and aspirations of mobility for indigenous students in several ways. In this chapter these forms of mobility are ordered along the central themes that surfaced most prominently in my engagements with indigenous students. Therefore this chapter discusses the importance of education, studying abroad (often entangled with migratory aspirations), and aspirations of working for the government of Bangladesh.

### **4.2 Education, status and mobility**

Education plays a crucial role in improving individuals’ socio-economic circumstances (Krueger & Lindahl 2001) while education in Bangladesh is a key asset to reduce poverty and access the lines of social mobility (Nath 2012: 50). Indigenous students who recently migrated to Dhaka are often among the first to receive university level education in their families. These opportunities have arisen as a result of the transformation of the Bangladeshi

economy in recent decades and increased access to higher education in Bangladesh (Lewis 2011). In addition, the commitment of students' families to ensure formal education has further opened up access to higher education for indigenous students from the CHT. Higher education is furthermore important for indigenous students in order to become part of higher echelons of Bangladeshi society, since formal education itself is a mark of distinction and a way to acquire linguistic and cultural competencies (see Bourdieu 1984). Studying in Dhaka is the primary reason for coming to the city while access to universities in the city is also perceived as the best way to access the lines of social mobility in Bangladesh. Broadly held perceptions on education among indigenous students are well captured by Jani, a female student in development studies.

*“We want our children to go to school and complete higher education. That is not just us, it is part of the culture in Bangladesh. If people are not educated they cannot have a good lifestyle and it is impossible to get a formal job, and without a formal job you cannot have a family. So education is very important to make something out of this life.” (Interview Jani, 6 March 2015)*

For indigenous students from the CHT there are other factors that make both education and coming to Dhaka take a central position in making choices for the future, Delwar explained this as follows.

*“I came to Dhaka for the good universities here. There are no universities in the CHT. But also Dhaka is better than other places, it has a different status and the best universities are in the city. I also wanted to come here because if you want to be someone in this life you have to be in Dhaka. It is just not the same as somewhere else” (Interview Delwar, 29 February 2015)*

For Delwar studying in Dhaka is more prestigious than elsewhere in Bangladesh. This is related to a perceived gap in opportunities between the ‘rural’ and ‘local’ CHT and ‘urban’ Dhaka. An important consideration when selecting an institution for higher education is the status a certain programme can provide students since this influences which pathways for mobility are opened or closed for students. This is clarified by Priya, a 26 year old student that I met several times in 2015 for a cup of coffee in the luxury of an air-conditioned lunchroom in the well-off neighbourhood of Dhanmondi.

*Priya studies engineering at BUET, an exclusive public university for engineering. She grew up in the Rangamati district of the CHT and refers to herself as “from the Tripura community”<sup>6</sup>. Her parents never went to university while her father works for the local government and owns a considerable tract of land in the Rangamati district. She explained to me that she aspires to become an engineer since this would make her parents proud. Her parents made great sacrifices since she is financially dependent on them for her education. She tells me elaborately about her future aspirations and how crucial education is in these. Priya made her decision for BUET and her discipline based on how this will help her to be successful in Bangladeshi society. About her choice for BUET she explains “it is not just the education. If you go to BUET you will have a certain status. Also you will know other people that went to BUET. The people you know will later be very important since you can ask for favours; people can help you find your way. If I would stay in Rangamati, I would not learn enough but I would also not have the connections to people who matter<sup>7</sup> outside the CHT. And we will always be dominated by the Bengalis there, they keep us small” (Fieldnote 10 July 2014)*

As Priya’s case illustrates, going to university is perceived among indigenous migrants as a gateway to social upward mobility crucial in escaping a marginalized position as a result of being indigenous. Networks are crucial here in order to be safe and having better chances of getting a paid job and material security. Status and a meaningful network are seen as crucial for one’s safety, both in Dhaka and for relatives in the CHT. While discussing the CHT and education, students often voiced their concerns of being exploited by state and army officials if they did not have the right connections to the state apparatus. Badiuzzaman and Murshed have recently shown that there is a relation between increasingly sending children to school and experiences of land possession, fears of eviction and experiencing violence among indigenous people in the CHT (Badiuzzaman & Murshed 2014). Education is thus perceived as enabling one to overcome the challenge of earning livelihoods from an ever dwindling amount of land for cultivation and to acquire qualifications to escape the conflict area (ibid). The expectation of improving one’s security and escaping violence was reflected among indigenous students in Dhaka as well, for example by Kishan when we discussed education

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<sup>6</sup> Tripura are a Tibetan-Burman ethnic minority community living both on plains of Bangladesh and the CHT.

<sup>7</sup> After enquiring later what “people who mattered” were she would clarify that these were politicians or people with political connections

and the precarious situation in the CHT.

*“Education is all we got left. The people<sup>8</sup> from the CHT are divided, education is how we can make a difference now. If every family has one person going to university, that person can reason critically, he can make sure, see, that what is happening is not good. He can make sure that the generation after him will go to school and is not forced into exploitation by the army, the settlers. An educated mind is an independent, free mind” (Interview Kishan, 28 June 2014)*

Here I want to highlight the link students make between insecurity and being uneducated. The lack of confidence in the future made students emphasize the importance of education since it was perceived as crucial for ‘future survival’. Or as Kamong clarifies:

*“My parents were easy to exploit; most people in the CHT are because when someone grabs their land they don’t know what to do, they have no papers, no law. However the students here in Dhaka do a good job, they are aware and work to get more students in higher education, helping them with admission tests. This way these students can help their families and community since they know that what is done is against the law” (Interview Kamong, 2 February 2015)*

However for students from the CHT there are additional obstacles to completing higher education. While attending primary, secondary and university level education, students have a relative disadvantage because of their limited linguistic competences in Bengali vis-à-vis their Bengali Bangladeshi peers. This creates a cultural barrier since separate language, in the form of a dialect or a limited vocabulary, is an effective guarantee of a separate social world that is not easily navigated by outsiders.

Furthermore students have to compensate for having limited cultural capital. This because indigenous students in Dhaka are usually less oriented towards celebrations of Bengali culture which are crucial network possibilities in accessing the higher echelons of Bangladeshi society. In addition, students cannot rely to the same extent on networks among higher classes in Dhaka due to their migrant and indigenous background, this way limiting their ability to achieve upward social mobility. The discriminatory structure, favouring

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<sup>8</sup> Here referring to the 12 different indigenous groups inhabiting the CHT

Bengali and Muslim segments in Bangladeshi society, as discussed in the background in chapter one, finds its way into the formal education system in Bangladesh as well, which favours certain higher classes, particularly from Bengali backgrounds (Rahman 2010). Still, indigenous students studying in Dhaka have usually better career prospects than previous generations of middle class indigenous youngsters from the CHT, while education also allows students to explore new opportunities and acquire linguistic and cultural competences crucial for achieving social mobility. I now turn to two highly sought after opportunities; studying abroad and becoming a government employee.

### **4.3 Studying abroad**

Since Katy Gardner famously explored the relationship between social mobility, insecurity and connectedness in relation to foreign places in Sylhet, Bangladesh (Gardner 2008), the image of the country as a place that is insecure and lacks prospects, particularly for young people, has increasingly been accounted for in studies on social mobility in the country. Here global connectedness, particularly through social connections or having the opportunity to visit foreign places, has come to stand for success in Bangladesh. This connectedness is enabled by obtaining a certain amount of social and cultural capital. In a study on middle-class youth in Dhaka, partially based on indigenous students, Bal (2014) has demonstrated that an overall sense of frustration and disappointment exists among young people about the direction of their lives. In addition, Bal illustrated the rapid socio-economic transformation in Bangladesh which has increased the visibility of global promises and local possibilities that have resulted in limited engagement with the country, especially among young people (Bal 2014). During fieldwork I was struck by the gap in visibility of global promises and the lack of opportunities to realise aspirations in Bangladeshi. Participants often confronted me with feelings of insecurity as to what will happen in the future in Bangladesh, due to political instability and reoccurring violence in the CHT, and how this would provide obstacles to their mobility aspirations. This led students to keep their future possibilities open as much as possible and look for opportunities to go abroad. These global opportunities were made visible due to increased access to imaginaries through media and contact with international NGO organisations and companies. As a result, particularly studies in western countries such as Australia, Canada, the U.S. and the U.K were mentioned regularly. Afsana's aspirations help demonstrate the argument through the following fieldnote.

*Afsana's is a 25 year-old who has graduated over two years ago from a university in Dhaka but has not been able to find a job at her level of education. Instead she has been taking government entry exams and has sent over forty unsuccessful applications for a variety of jobs. This was common among the (former) students I met. Asking her about her future she answered: "The best way to become someone in Bangladesh is to complete your studies abroad, especially if you don't have the right political connections here. The studies are better, you see the world and everyone will look up to you and you will find a job easily. This way it is the best way to achieve a secure life. In your country, if you do not study maybe you can still have a good life, but here in Bangladesh it is impossible" (Fieldnote Afsana, 21 February 2015)*

Although many students aspired to go abroad not many had the opportunity to actually do so. Only those that had the financial means and had excellent results in university went. Despite these barriers, several research participants had successfully completed studies abroad. One of them is Farid, who went to Australia.

*Before I met Farid I had heard other students refer to him respectfully as someone to look up to. Farid grew up in the CHT district of Khagrachari and describes himself as indigenous and Chakma. Throughout his education he has always been a high achiever, being first in his class in primary and secondary school and continued to be among the best of his year when studying engineering at BUET. After completing his bachelor he worked as a fire safety inspector at an American multinational company that produces part of its goods in Bangladesh. Not fully satisfied with his career possibilities there, he successfully applied for a master's at a top university in Australia. About his experiences in Australia he narrated: "In order for me to be the person I want to be I have to do this. If I want to really reach the top I have to complete a master at a foreign university. It will help me to understand the world and it will open up a wide range of opportunities when I come back. I had a very good job actually, I already worked for a multinational before I went to Australia and BUET provided me with a very good education. But still it is not the same as having studied in Australia." For Farid, studying abroad is expected to open up a way to what he calls 'the top', which in this case he later explained are higher management positions with regular visits abroad. (Fieldnote Farid, 15 August 2014)*

As Afsana's and Farid's stories illustrate, studying abroad is seen as a gateway to social

mobility among indigenous students in Dhaka. Key terms that would often come up during conversations about studying abroad were good salaries, status and being successful. The widely held aspirations of studying abroad and the way in which several individuals managed to do so, illustrates the interconnectedness of indigenous students to others parts of the world. However not all aspirations were located outside Bangladesh. In the upcoming section I reveal another common held mobility aspiration, that of being recruited as a Bangladeshi government civil servant.

#### **4.4 Becoming a government employee**

Earlier in this thesis I illustrated the antagonism that many indigenous groups from the CHT feel towards the Bangladeshi state as a result of its social-historical role in the region (Mohsin 2002). It is important to realise here that most of the students in this study are from families that belong to the local elites or middle classes (not to be confused with the national elite) which have drawn on state resources and have been part of state mechanisms for centuries<sup>9</sup>. These links did not led students to uncritically adopt the Bangladeshi state as their legitimate representation due to targeted violence in the CHT, their exclusion from hegemonic nationalist discourses and the severe corruption that affects everyone in Bangladesh. Instead students displayed a sceptical, at times antagonistic stance towards the Bangladeshi state. However, at the same time students demonstrated an awareness of a need to engage in state institutions to achieve social mobility. As a result, students across the board aspired to become government officials to benefit from the status, security and opportunities that such a position brings about. Rupa is one of these students.

*I meet Rupa at a friend's place during a party attended by indigenous students only. Being confident and talkative, Rupa has the courage to come up to me and introduce himself which was pretty uncommon for students to do<sup>10</sup>. After exchanging formalities, he proudly tells me he has just passed the first round of a government exam to become a civil servant. He was planning to go Australia to study initially, but when he passed the first exam he decided to stay because "it means security" and a stable income. After which he continued to explain the benefits of being a government cadre official by highlighting the importance of belonging*

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<sup>9</sup> Several participants had the family name Dewan which is a title that refers to the status of village chief. These chiefs under colonial rule were responsible for tax collection and are until today rural elites. Until today the title provides a certain status.

<sup>10</sup> After establishing trust participants explained to me that this was since I was white and they were scared to leave a bad impression. Note the internalization of racial hierarchies.

*and having a local network; “if I study abroad I can get a job here, [...] I am not from a rich family and I don’t have a good large network as the Bengalis have. It is impossible for me because I am indigenous. If I will stay abroad I can have a good life, but I will probably not get a good job there since it is difficult. I will do a simple job and still make enough money. Then I rather have the government job since it comes with certain opportunities to make extra money”.* (Fieldnote Rupa, 17-02-2015)

Due to the lack of symbolic capital in the form of prestige and status, indigenous students in Dhaka perceive government jobs as the best way of accumulating prestige and status which is easily convertible into economic capital (see Bourdieu 1984: 179). As Rupa’s story illustrates, many students come from rural elites or new middle classes but lack the social and cultural capital needed to be part of higher echelons of society in Dhaka. Engaging in government institutions by applying for government jobs is seen as a shortcut to accumulating this capital and to be a successful and have what Rupa calls have “a good life”.

The example I presented here is not only a demonstration of an aspiration. It is also a way to contest the narrative often put forward by policy makers in Bangladesh and at times by advocates of indigenous people living in the CHT, as having an antagonistic stance towards Bangladesh. These lack a reflexive stance on a broader set of concerns by the people involved, ignoring internal differences among these groups and the complexity and constant reconfiguration of these antagonisms. Indigenous advocates’ representations this way often resemble what James Ferguson refers to as an “anti-politics machine” failing to take into account the heterogeneity in populations and the inequalities of power and social transformation inherent in them (Ferguson 1990). Here the story of Rupa, and many others, who feel part of Bangladesh and want to become government employees, reveals that the picture is not as straight forward as one might believe.

#### **4.5 Concluding remarks**

This chapter has illustrated how the seeds of desires and aspirations among indigenous students in Dhaka could be seen germinating. Their desires do not so much spring from indigenous activist propositions that box all indigenous groups in rooted, Arcadian interpretations of belonging. Rather, indigenous students from the CHT attempt, and in differing degrees achieve, mobility through formal education, studying abroad, and by seeking state employment in Dhaka. In the upcoming chapter I examine how these aspirations

and pathways for mobility alter notions of belonging. In addition, I illustrate how increased access to a broad set of lifestyles increases exposure and involvement in consumer cultures and the consumption of global imaginaries, makes the need to rethink indigenous identities an urgent matter.

## **5. Lifestyle, Global Aspirations and Indigeneity**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines global imaginaries, lifestyle and consumption in students' lives and how these influence their understandings of being indigenous. Insight in lifestyles is important for several reasons. To start with, threats to indigenous ties to land and the associated lifestyle are often portrayed as damaging to peoples fate (see for example Nicholas 1996). Furthermore peoples' physical absence from the CHT threaten images of the CHT as an area exclusively inhabited by indigenous peoples and undermines the imaginary of indigenous people as rooted in certain lands. These understandings reduce the room to manoeuvre for indigenous subjects and fixes them into what is portrayed as an 'indigenous', Arcadian lifestyle. By revealing how indigenous identities are redefined in Dhaka by looking at the relevance of being indigenous in students' day-to-day lives, and as a meta-narrative of belonging, understandings of the heterogeneity of indigenous identities and alterities are enhanced. Furthermore, by specifically looking at these reconstructions against the backdrop of global imaginaries, popular culture and consumerism, room is created to start deconstructing notions of contemporary indigeneity as an attempt to live up to an impossible standard of authenticity.

### **5.2 Consumerism as lifestyle**

In Bangladesh, since its secession from Pakistan, the transformation of the economy through processes of liberalization and opening up to the world, accompanied by the process of rapid urbanization (Lewis 2011: 136) has produced consumer spaces, particularly in Dhaka, that seek to create 'global spaces'. These new consumer spaces are exemplified by large shopping malls throughout the city which differ from 'wet markets' since they do not sell goods such as meat, fish and vegetables. Contrary to these wet markets, shopping malls have guarded entry restrictions, with metal detectors and guards, and air-conditioning. In a study on shopping malls in India, scholars have revealed how status distinctions are reconstructed in

malls (Mathur 2010) while they can function as spaces that take consumers away from the city and nation and into a global world of fashion and brand name consumer goods (McDuierra 2012: 72).

During fieldwork I visited several shopping malls as part of participants' day-to-day lives. To one of these shopping malls, Bashundara city, I returned four times. During these visits, malls proved to be important meeting places for indigenous students, linked to what they would describe as 'moving forward' since social mobility is perceived as linked to consumption. Furthermore association were made between consuming and Dhaka as a place where access to goods is more widely available than in the CHT. I now explore these remarks further through a fieldnote taken of a mall visit.

*In the early afternoon I got a SMS text message from Sam, a key respondent, stating: "I am with Dibas and Ajoy, we are going to Bashundara city and they have a car! You should come". Bashundara is the largest indoor mall in Bangladesh and thirty minutes after Sam's message I found myself in the rare luxury of an air-conditioned minivan heading to the mall with a group of eight male students. This was a rare luxury during fieldwork and was treated as such given the regular proud acclamations of how nice it was to have the car available.*

*When arriving at the mall a colossal building rose over us with an impressive squared, concrete, almost bunker like appearance common among recently constructed buildings in the city. The complex opened in 2004 and has 21 floors that house 2500 retail stores selling mainly clothes and electronics. On the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the complex there is a theme park called Toggi World. Here miniature replicas of the Taj Mahal, Eiffel Tower and Statue of Liberty are on display. Furthermore there are rides that include a mini roller-coaster, bumper cars, a flying carpet and a pink Cadillac, adding to the global image of the mall and perceptions of having access to goods and images from around the world inside the mall.*

*While strolling through the mall I am told that many participants come here regularly, not to buy things but rather to "spent leisure time and just relax". Buying daily necessities here is not an option since most of the products for sale are more expensive than at wet markets. The main purpose of our visit is to buy Dibas a shirt for his university convocation ceremony. After visiting several shops he buys a shirt after which I expect us to go elsewhere. Instead we spend over two more hours in the mall meeting friends, male and female, which were also spending leisure time at the mall. I observed that none of the people we met had shopping bags with them, signalling that they were not actively buying goods. The reasons of their visit was rather, as Ajoy, a younger member of Dibas' entourage*

*explained, that the mall has “places from all over the world, you can buy anything here and I really feel as if I am connected with the world here. That really makes it a good place for us to escape Dhaka when we get fed up with the chaos at places like new market<sup>11</sup>”. I ask him whether he still goes to other markets: “off course, I buy many things there but I like it better here, the atmosphere”. Later Ajoy admitted to me that he had never bought anything at the mall apart from water and snacks. (Fieldnote, 4 February 2015)*

As the fieldnote illustrates, the Bashundara city mall functions as a place where one can escape Dhaka and in Ajoy’s words be ‘connected with the world’ by informing oneself about the latest global trends. Participants’ visits to the Bashundara shopping mall are not so much about shopping but rather about accessing a lifestyle while being exposed to new ways of consumption in the mall. For consumption as a material practice does not necessarily require a consuming subject (keeping Ajoy in mind), it also depends on the integration of a subject with spaces that have been designed for the purpose of consuming. It is therefore not surprising that shopping malls have been crucial components for the development of global capitalism since they fulfil the function of laboratories of consumption (Simpson 2010).

Shopping malls and themed environments, such as Toggi World at the Bashundara mall, with its references to global symbols, work as mediums through which actors reconfigure their relationships with the world around them (Patino & Caldwell 2002). I therefore argue that visits to the mall, without necessarily buying goods, allow indigenous students to fulfil aspirations of a global, consumerist lifestyle by receiving instructions into consumerism by spending leisure time in the mall that teaches them to navigate spaces of consumption. This way the space of the mall closes the gap that Appadurai’s interpretation of globalization as the dissemination of scapes leaves in understanding the material aspect of globalization and images. This since the mall as a transnational urban space serves not only to stimulate imagination and partially satisfy aspirations, it also instils a consumption lifestyle into behaviour.

### **5.3 Global images, indigeneity and exclusion**

*“You know, it does not matter where you are, where you live or what kind of job a person does. If he is from the CHT he will be indigenous forever, it does not matter if he is in Dhaka*

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<sup>11</sup> New Market is a popular shopping centre north of Azimpur in Dhaka built in 1952

*or in the CHT, it is who we are. You for example are not, so you never can be indigenous”*  
(Interview Ajosh, 25, 11 February 2015)

*“Just think about it. There are many Chakmas in Paris, in France. They went there after an adoption programme from a school in Khagrachari. My aunt was part of that. She came to visit me a few months ago and she gave me this Gucci bag. She is indigenous, although she lives in Paris and works in a shop. She came so I took her to Khagrachari and showed her everything. She was very sad to leave. These things do not change. That is also why she supports the indigenous when there is trouble or when we need help.”* (Interview Sander, 27, 3 February 2015)

The preceding paragraph has illustrated the importance of consumption and provided a first glimpse into the role global images and lifestyles play in students’ day-to-day lives. In what follows, I further examine how lifestyle and consumption influence self-identification, particularly against the backdrop of pressures to perform a certain ‘indigenous’ identity. Being indigenous, as Povinelli has illustrated, is often associated with people living in full presence of ‘traditions’ whereas these traditions existed in some point of time while residuals of these traditions can still be found in indigenous subjects (Povinelli 2002: 48). This way the discourses that shape indigeneity constitute indigenous subjects as failures since they can never fully live up to the promise of indigenous tradition. Despite the often emphasized, naturalized links between being indigenous and having a non-industrial mode of production and being rooted in peripheral, preferably even jungle lands (cf. Eriksen 2002: 125), participants reinterpreted and reconstructed the meaning of indigeneity among themselves to validate themselves as indigenous. This explains why Ajosh in the opening of this paragraph emphasized that he is indigenous forever. His lifestyle may not be in line with indigenous traditions and livelihoods, but for Ajosh this does not mean that he is no longer indigenous. This was a common comment during fieldwork and reflects common perceptions of indigenous identity as something one cannot lose. Unsurprisingly, this does not mean that students discard the importance of being indigenous. They do not do away with ‘indigenous traditions’ when they move to Dhaka. Certain practises that are seen as central to being indigenous are being revoked in the city and there is a negotiation of boundaries between ‘mainstream people’, which is how most participants refer to ethnic Bengali Bangladeshis, and indigenous people. This is a result of regular experiences of exclusion by indigenous students from mainstream discourses in which indigenous students are portrayed in line with

the associations with indigenous as described by Povinelli. Ashok shines light on how these portrayals affect notions of belonging for students:

*“At first when I came here my classmates at the university asked if I ate frogs and snakes and if we run around naked all day. They still have this idea that we are all simple people you know and are not at home here. Dhaka is my home and it is getting better since now they know me better. But imagine how it feels when you constantly have to prove that!” (Interview Ashok, 7 March 2015)*

For indigenous migrants physical appearance plays a central role in daily experiences and contacts with non-indigenous people in Dhaka. Their often Tibetan-Mongolian physical features place them outside Bangladeshi mainstream since they are not Bengali Bangladeshi. This leads to a constant questioning of their citizenship and evokes images of immorality communicated in terms of cultural difference that defy the ideal of taken for granted, normative national collective morality (see Povinelli 2002: 137-138). As a result, students regularly have to prove that they are not ‘simple’, ‘backward’ people and counter these images. Furthermore indigenous students in Dhaka are trapped into adhering to an ‘indigenous identity’ since they are placed outside mainstream discourses and inside indigenous discourses in Bangladeshi society. Indigenous identity, as a demand of the recognition of cultural difference, is put forward here as an answer to exclusion referring to ways in which indigenous identity may function as an answer to ontological insecurity and questions of belonging. I delve into these roles of indigenous identification in more details in the upcoming section.

#### **5.4 “I want to be a global citizen”**

*“I am indigenous because I am from the CHT. I am also from Dhaka. Here I hope to learn about mainstream society, other countries, and learn these things to my people” (Interview Santi, 5 February 2015)*

*“I like Dhaka. Here you can have everything. But I feel as if we are becoming extinct as a people. We use English too much nowadays; we don’t know the traditional dances, traditional culture. In a few generations everything will be lost” (Interview Shane, 26 June*

2014)

Being indigenous in South Asia has been associated with an apolitical lifestyle while in global activist discourses of indigeneity notions of indigenous communities as essentialized and in harmony with nature are reproduced. This serves the agenda of international indigenous activists but runs the risk of leading to a new kind of Orientalism which overlooks the heterogeneity of indigenous subjects and silences those that do not fit its mould (Shah 2010: 128). It is against this backdrop that I attempt to illustrate how indigenous student's lifestyles are not in line with indigenous activists' representations of them, and how these representations influence self-perceptions. A fieldnote about Benson clarifies the argument.

*Benson is a bachelor student in business administration and was one of my roommates during the second period of fieldwork. We spend several nights watching English Premier League football matches (due to the time difference matches were often broadcasted in during the night) and listening to his favourite Bollywood music. Instead of spending a lot of time on his studies, Benson spends hours, particularly during the night, playing online poker games to pay for his studies and for his apartment. It was important for him to be in Dhaka since "for my business I need a stable internet connection, how will I make money without that?" When we were talking about our childhoods he explained: "I have always faced so much pressure from our community. Always we have to be different things. I mean when we went to the indigenous peoples' day<sup>12</sup> last time you see people with their dances and singing. Than people think we are not normal people. They like the dancing but I don't think it helps us. How does that help me to get a job? Help for people in Dhaka to respect me? They just think we are weird". (Fieldnote Benson, 18 & 21 February 2015)*

The feeling Benson describes of not fitting the picture put forward in staging indigeneity was common among indigenous students in Dhaka. Like many however, Benson would still classify himself as indigenous, attend indigenous events, and speak with a sense of melancholy and pride of the CHT's natural beauty. At the same time he struggles with 'being indigenous' in daily life, experiencing a gap between his lifestyle as a student and having access to international entertainment and consumer goods while at the same living up to an

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<sup>12</sup> Indigenous peoples' day is internationally celebrated on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August every year, the main event being held at Shaheed Minar in Dhaka. Globally the theme for 2014 was 'Bridging the gap: implementing the rights of indigenous peoples'.

indigenous lifestyle influenced by representations put forward by indigenous activists at events and in media. This discrepancy did not lead students to disregard their being indigenous. Monica for example explained while listening to a song by an indigenous musician in the Chakma language<sup>13</sup>:

*“I feel as if I am indigenous and I did grow up in CHT and feel as if I am part of that. I can identify with the song. I have a dress like that too<sup>14</sup>, although I don’t wear it in Dhaka. But I like life in Dhaka better. Here I can buy things I cannot buy in the CHT, I can get a good education, I am in contact with the world, internet on my phone works, you have so many stores. That is not so in the CHT. I really feel like I am a city girl now.” (Interview Monica, 3 March 2015)*

The growing group of indigenous students in Dhaka refutes a generational and aspirational gap within families between students and their parents. While elder generations are more trapped by the rhetoric’s of their alleged ties to land, younger generations, although they remain to have close links to the CHT, do not perceive their physical presence in the area necessary to maintain a link to the land. Rather they embrace a lifestyle in Dhaka that is at times conflicting with their parents’ norms and values in attempts to negotiate and navigate Dhaka and find ways to reap the benefits from urban life. At the same time they remain to feel belonging to an indigenous group as part of a meta-narrative of belonging that cannot to the same extent be gained from other narratives of belonging such as that of Bangladeshi nationalism.

## **5.5 Concluding remarks**

This chapter has illustrated how notions of belonging and self-identifications as indigenous are redefined by indigenous students against the backdrop of students access to global images and lifestyles. I have demonstrated how mall visits allow students to fulfil their aspirations of accessing a consumerist lifestyle and how they are taught into practices of consumption by spending their leisure time in indoor malls. At the same time, I have revealed how essentialized notions of being indigenous, put forward by indigenous advocates and

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<sup>13</sup> Chakma language is a Tibeto-Burman language but has been strongly influenced by Bengali and Hindu influences in recent decades that many now consider it a dialect of Bengali.

<sup>14</sup> The dress Monica refers to is Pinon Khadi, a ‘traditional’ dress which is often worn by Chakma women working on land or markets, and in Dhaka at events or during rituals

internalized by indigenous students, result in conflicts as to how to reconcile their lifestyles as students in Dhaka, having access to a wide range of consumption goods and global images, with essentialized notions of indigenous identity. This has led to the emergence of an 'urban indigenous' identity resulting in internal conflicts of belonging. These conflicts are enhanced by a constant questioning of indigenous students nationalism and citizenship by non-indigenous Bangladeshis and regular expressions of their immorality communicated in terms of cultural difference vis-à-vis Bangladeshi mainstream discourses.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study has examined how indigenous student migrants from the Chittagong Hill Tracts who live in Dhaka experience increased mobility and how access to new lifestyles and global imaginaries affect notions of indigeneity among them. The growing group of indigenous students in Dhaka are part of a broader process of social change in Bangladesh; that of rural-urban migration as a result of an increasingly globalized economy which has driven demand for labour in cities. At the same time increased infrastructure, transportation and communication in Bangladesh paired with a process of centralization and a lack of educational opportunities in the CHT, has contributed to an increasing number of indigenous students migrating from the CHT to major urban centres.

Representations of indigenous people, both in Bangladesh as elsewhere, are influenced by the ways in which the international indigenous rights movement has successfully placed the recognition of cultural rights within various international and regional institutions (Engle 2011). In doing so, the rights movement has largely neglected class dimensions among indigenous people and has portrayed indigenous people the world over as static, immobile and close to nature (Corbridge 1988, Devalle 1992). In addition, the emphasis on ties to lands one is indigenous to makes indigenous people who migrate to cities, such as the students in the case at hand, seem inauthentic indigenous, placing their challenges outside advocates concerns. These constructions have contributed to assumptions in Bangladesh of indigenous people as out of place in Dhaka and rooted in the jungles of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

By applying a theoretical framework of mobility this thesis explored how to go beyond the essentialized, cultural-based identity politics that have come to dominate indigenous debates (Shah 2010) by bringing together the social concerns of inequalities and hierarchies while taking into account cultural concerns of representation. Another reason for

the applicability of mobility is that it carries powerful connotations that counter illusions of stationary life which breaks with the insularity of the local (Skrbis, Woodward & Bean 2013). This since in Bangladesh, narrow understandings of indigeneity have led to interpretations of indigenous people as inferior subjects rooted in peripheral, jungle lands (Bal 2007).

As I have illustrated in chapter four, indigenous students experience mobility through their access to higher education, studying abroad, career opportunities and access to lifestyles that were unavailable to their parents. As a result students managed to access lines of mobility that were largely closed to previous generations of indigenous people from the CHT. While pursuing their mobility aspirations students faced additional challenges as a result of notions of indigenous as backward and associated with subsistence agriculture and living in jungles and because of their limited cultural and social capital limiting their ability to expand their networks into Bengali Bangladeshi dominated elites.

To further provide insight in inclusive non-essentialized indigenous identities, chapter 5 has examined the role of global imaginaries and access to new lifestyles as part of a process of redefining students' place in the world. Important here are spaces in which consumption and access to international goods and images are available. I demonstrated this importance by illustrating how mall visits allow indigenous students to fulfil lifestyle aspirations while being exposed to practices of consumption and global images. This way shopping malls influence the redefinition of an indigenous identity among students in Dhaka. Furthermore, these engagements in new lifestyle opportunities challenge contemporary understandings of indigenous identities as out of place in urban settings and related to non-traditional lifestyles. At the same time mall visits revealed how feelings of existential insecurity among indigenous students in Dhaka are heightened due to their inability to live up to being authentic indigenous and being modern Bangladeshi citizens at the same time.

Previously, ground-breaking scholarship on indigenous recognition and alterities has illustrated the dangers inherent in indigenous rights propositions that present indigenous communities as essentialized and nature loving (Corbridge 1988, Gledhill 1997, Shah 2010). I have illustrated how these representations affect self-identification among indigenous students from the CHT in Dhaka. Participants in this study would often classify themselves as indigenous but experienced existential insecurity due to their inability to live up to the impossible standard of indigenous authenticity imposed on them through indigenous rights propositions. This misrecognition is experienced as a form of oppression, imprisoning students in a false, distorted mode of being, inflicting a grievous wound.

However, it would be incorrect to portray indigenous students as passive subjects whose notions of belonging and self-identification are solely defined by the misrecognition imposed by indigenous rights propositions. Rather students challenged these interpretations by redefining what being indigenous means to them in an urban environment. They often described indigenous identity as something you were born into, something that cannot be lost but at the same time is subject to change.

Furthermore, this study has demonstrated how indigenous agency is vital in understanding contemporary social changes among indigenous people by going beyond identity-based politics of advocates and the images they invoke. These representations limit the room indigenous subjects have to navigate identity positions, particularly of themselves as indigenous and being Bangladeshi. However, the purpose here has not been to reject indigenous activism. Rather, I attempted to reveal the complexities inherent in indigenous identities and alterities in order to be able to better understand unintended side effects of activist propositions and tackle problems of representation.

To conclude, I have sought to provide insight in the varied ways of mobility of indigenous students in Dhaka. In doing so I illustrated how such a focus bridges a knowledge gap in contemporary understandings of indigenous identity by exposing class dimensions to indigenous representations while countering essentialized, place bound understandings of indigenous identity. To remedy the injustice faced by indigenous people on many levels, I argue, following Fraser, for cultural and symbolic change that re-evaluates disrespected identities. This requires a transformation of societal patterns of representation, interpretation and communication that changes everybody's sense of self (Fraser 1995: 73). To enable such a remedy there is a need for a re-evaluation of indigenous identity by acknowledging indigenous peoples' heterogeneity, particularly in terms of class, livelihoods, notions of belongings and future aspirations. This way, understandings of the complexity of indigenous identity are enhanced that go beyond the interpretations of indigenous culture as authentic, bounded homogenous formations which are so stifling to indigenous students in Dhaka.

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