FREEDOM LIES IN HUMANITY:
A DECONSTRUCTION OF INDIGENEITY

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Abstract: Indigenous peoples, through a portrayal of a sustained homogenous past, have enacted hegemony and resistance. The over-portrayal masks important existing dimensions of processes of culture change and indigenous groups ultimately suffer the consequences. The article reviews the need to explore ‘tradition’ not only as a ‘cultural repertoire’ but also as a dynamic entity with power relations.

Introduction

Culture, in current anthropological awareness, is a constantly changing, disharmonious, and unbounded site of fluidity, multiplicity, fragmentation, and resistance. While this definition reflects the dynamics of most cultures around the world, it leaves most indigenous cultures unexamined. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to come to a definition of culture that will explain the nature of indigenous cultures, but to show the reasons why most indigenous cultures do not fit this type of modern definitions. Much of the mismatch between the definition of culture and indigenous cultures arises from indigenous groups’ focus on a historical ‘difference’ with other competing non-indigenous groups in the states they live in. Such a focus on preserved difference or ‘tradition’ implies that indigenous cultures are unchanging, constant, intact, non-dialectic, and independent of any connection to the outer world. Although a focus on ‘tradition’ has largely grown as a reaction to the injustice committed against indigenous peoples across the world and resulted in gaining a good lot of benefits for them, this also limits the contribution an awareness of indigeneity can truly make to these peoples. Paradoxically however, while indigenes need to deconstruct this indigenous/non-indigenous dichotomy for having a greater freedom, they fear non-recognition in de-emphasizing their ‘tradition’. I argue that such a deconstruction is necessary and should only be perused by indigenes once they have their identity recognized by the state or other competing groups. This is a way out from the ‘recognition’ and ‘deconstruction’ paradox. In what follows, I draw on the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh to reveal the negative effects of a focus on ‘tradition’ which illustrates tradition as a conjuration of power relations than a life-style. It should be kept in mind that my argument is not a political dismissal of indigenous movements but an academic deconstruction and a commitment to break free indigenous cultures the negative effects of such stereotyping.

Stativity Reconsidered

The focus on ‘tradition’ assumes that indigenous groups, in this case those in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), have maintained their cultures unchanged for several centuries. Now by drawing on the situation of indigenous peoples in Canada we can get a sense of the nature of mobility among these groups which may help us in apprehending the situation in the CHT. Rather than in the reserves, many indigenes in Canada now live in big cities. Rather than ‘traditional’ dresses, they wear jeans. Some of them engage in sophisticated jobs such as university teaching and use modern technologies such as computers (see; Miller 2003). The most intriguing aspect of these changes is their implication for the indigeneity of indigenous peoples. Do Canadian indigenes lose their indigeneity because of bringing in all these modernity in their lives? The answer is obviously no, because nothing will be more frustrating than losing indigeneity just because of wearing jeans instead of some other dresses; adoption of a particular dress is not a standard that indigeneity should be or is measured against. Moreover, in the face of the recent scholarship in indigenous studies, a few will argue against the fact that indigeneity does not have any sort of connection with a particular way of life. Then the risk of portraying a continuation of an unbroken ‘tradition’ by indigenes is making themselves non-indigenous to the dominant society members given the fact that...
the present living condition of many indigenes does not fit the projected stereotype. By drawing on similar transformation, I show how such a focus on ‘tradition’ in the Chittagong Hill Tracts risks sacrificing the outcome of decades long struggle.

Ever since their contact with the European occupiers, the CHT inhabitants have gone through massive changes in their habitats, political leadership, economic opportunities, and religious adherence. Upon grabbing the power, much of the Tracts had been declared as the state land by the British rule and subsequently inaccessible to indigenes. As a result, indigenous groups lost their lands on which they had been growing crops mainly through jhum (slash and burn) cultivation. Except for three chiefs, all kings lost their authority under the British occupation. Many converted to Christianity under growing missionary influence (see; Schendel et al. 2001). Besides these historical transformation, many indigenes now take modern education, live in cities instead of Hills, wear dresses that are not really ‘indigenous’. Thus, a focus on ‘intact’ and ‘unchanged’ notion of indigenous cultures in the CHT denies the changing history of indigenous groups. In other words, it makes indigenous cultures not as dynamic as the others such as that of the Bengalis. The denial of history makes them ‘people without history’. More importantly, a focus on ‘tradition’ denies the fact that indigenous peoples can adopt new things in their cultures and yet maintain their indigeneity at the same time. In this way, a focus on ‘tradition’ either cuts apart indigeneity from modernity, or portrays modernity or change unachievable by indigenes. In practice, indigenes now neither follow the ‘tradition’ they claim to have continued, nor acknowledge the changes in their ‘tradition’. In addition to being ‘people without history’, they now become ‘people without culture’.

**Boundedness Reconsidered**

An emphasis on ‘tradition’ by indigenes in the CHT also presupposes a disconnection between indigenous cultures and the outer world, as otherwise indigenes would have had their lifestyles at least marginally changed. But an examination of the history reveals that indigenes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts had external connections at least during the last two-three hundred years. The CHT peoples experienced interventions from several external power centres in this period.

The British legal frameworks in the CHT were targeted for the appropriation of local resources. The British rule of the Chittagong Hill Tracts was marked simultaneously by the amalgamation of different identities into a single one and the creation of new ones. As a result of the British policy of classifying, dividing and ruling the colonized, the ‘Hill people’ emerged as a different category of people opposing the Bengalees. In this way, indigeneity of the Hill people was a colonial creation (Tripura 1992). The region in the Pakistani period (1947-1971) reflects tension between the local, national, and regional interests. In this era, the Chittagong Hill Tracts became a contested zone because of the India-Pakistan rivalry, West vs. East Pakistan antagonism and their eventual separation, and its link with the regional and global powers. Bangladesh’s policy on the region has been shaped by Hill leaders’ political links and strategies, the Hill Tract’s geo-strategic importance, and India’s role in the conflict. All these dynamics influenced indigeneity in the Tracts.

In the colonial period, the British policy of creating ‘otherness’, imposed legal categories, and the influence of macro-political feature altogether created the path that indigenes had to walk through. In the Pakistani period, indigenes had to go through the global politics and its local impact. In the Bangladeshi period, the difficult road of indigeneity was influenced by the strategies of the nation-states and transnational connections of indigenous peoples. Thus, rather than the opposite, indigenous groups in the CHT were connected to the outer world by the dominant rulers, if not by themselves. A claim of ‘boundedness’ by an unchanging ‘tradition’ is a denial not only of national histories but also of the global affairs. More importantly, such a claim also is a distortion of the CHT history by the Hill peoples themselves.
**Homogeneity Reconsidered**

The major problems with the focus on ‘tradition’ are the amalgamation of different practices into a single one and the creation of new ones. In case of the CHT, the amalgamation of diverse practices into a single one by the focus on ‘tradition’ denies the fact that the CHT have populations with diverse backgrounds. As the movement is mostly organized by larger indigenous groups, a prolonged focus on a ‘tradition’ may result in non-recognition of identities for smaller indigenous groups by the dominant ones. Then a ‘tradition’ theory is a renewal of the same homogenizing policies of the previous rulers by the present dominant indigenous groups over the non-dominant ones. Furthermore, it also denies the fact that the CHT crisis actually arose as a reaction to such amalgamating or homogenizing attempts by the British, Pakistani and the Bangladeshi regimes.

There are 13 different indigenous groups whose members live in the Tracts. These are different religious groups such as the Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and groups with other indigenous beliefs. Most of them have their own language. Their residence patterns are different, and so are their subsistence activities. Their dress patterns are also different. A theory of a single CHT ‘tradition’ can not account for these diversities (Mohsin 1997). The homogenization theory erodes indigenes’ internal differences and as such their identities more than anything else. Besides, a focus on homogeneity denies the existence of conflict in these societies- a denial not supported by the events in the CHT. There have been conflicts between different groups in the CHT even before the arrival of the European rulers. There have been conflicts between the rulers and indigenes and between different indigenous groups on power and resource sharing issues in the post-British period as well (Rahman 2003). There are conflicts even now between the PCJSS and UPDF. The erasure of conflicts probably is the result of a precaution against the fear that a failure to conceal the presence of such events among the Hill dwellers will result in refusal of their indigeneity in the national level- a threat that comes from the popular homogenous imagination of indigeneity that had earlier been created among the mass people by a stereotyped presentation of indigeneity. Ironically, this erasure of conflicts presupposes that indigenes can not have conflict and indigeneity at the same time. In this way after years of struggle, a focus on homogeneity traps indigenes either in a circle of ‘de-humanity’ or ‘erasure of identity’.

**Rigid Notion of Difference and their Implication**

The difference between the Bengalis and Hill people, to a large extent, was a colonial creation (Tripura 1992). The British created this difference mainly to justify their ruling by the ‘divide and rule’ policy, and carry out economic appropriation of the CHT resources. Although the recent focus on the difference between indigenes and the Bengalis by indigenous groups strengthened their resistance movements against the state, this also led indigenes to accept the vocabulary created by the colonial rulers for them which guaranteed only a sub-human standard. The British classification ensured Hill peoples’ status as strange and primitive, as if indigenes did not belong to a ‘standard’ category of people. Political leaders might have been called kings, instead they were named chiefs. Different identities could have been called ‘nations’, instead they were named ‘tribes’. The focus on difference by indigenes is an endorsement of this linguistic exoticization of them by the colonial rulers that later on permitted both the destruction and idealization of indigenous peoples by different regimes.

The emphasis on difference produces a popular image of indigeneity which is remotely connected to indigenes’ daily existence. As a result, mass people encountering indigenes not fitting the stereotype tend to either deny indigenous peoples’ indigeneity or wonder over the mismatch between the imagined ideal type and the ‘real’ living type of indigenous existence. This pushes ordinary persons to move away from the realization that indigenes, like others around the world, are somewhat different from each other. More importantly, it obscures the fact that since all indigenous groups are somewhat different from each other, what makes them united is not only their cultural ‘stereotype’
but also their common legacy of colonialism and internal colonization. The stereotype conjures up popular memory with images that has little to do with the real history of indigenes. The amazing variety of human existence is now replaced in the popular imagination by one image only (see; Smith 1994). This leaves indigenes with no option but either to show off an imagined homogenous culture for themselves to remain recognized, otherwise to lose their indigeneity altogether in the popular diasporas; either they remain half-human (indigenes), or risk even losing that. Strategically, the stereotype begs endorsement from the dominant non-indigenes and risks non-indigenity for indigenes if the stereotype is not endorsed by the dominant society.

Catastrophically, this necessity for endorsement of indigeneity generates a process of ‘internal colonization’ of indigenous peoples by the members of the larger society. The cultural repertoire of indigeneity is then converted into a commodity given up by indigenes to the hands of non-indigenes to be controlled by.

The popular imagination leaves ordinary persons with the assumption that the life is the opposite for indigenes from the non-indigenes. Indigenes lack what others possess; love and hatred, sympathy and enmity, pain and pleasure, happiness and sadness, opulence and poverty, disease and recovery, political ambition and leadership, greed and lust and so on. Indigenes have everything but human qualities. The stereotype demonstrates indigenes as strange and exotic peoples to the dominant non-indigenes and requires indigenes to keep showing off their exoticness. This leads the public portrayal of indigeneity to delineate the extravagancies of occasions in indigenous lives than everyday events. In this portrayal, rituals overshadow indigenes’ day to day lives, festivity regularity, and celebrations banality. An examination of photographs of the Hill Tracts reveals these facts. Domestic utensils and hunting tools are one of the major focuses of available photographs of the Hill Tracts, as if one can easily infer about Hill peoples by observing their tools. Although in case of non-indigenes tools are only tools, for indigenes tools go beyond their material quality and project an image of the people who use them. The photographs mostly capture Hill peoples in their festive dresses; celebrations replace the banalities of daily life. Rituals are probably the single-most dominant focus of the available photos in portraying the ‘Hilliness’ of the Hill people; individualism is over-sacrificed for collectivity. Men are invariably depicted with their hunting and fighting tools; ‘feminine’ peacefulness is replaced by ‘masculine’ aggressiveness. This results in the non-representation of domestic women in the photos. However, this non-representation is compensated by the photographic presence of dancing Hill girls in rituals and celebrations. Dancing girls become powerful and important enough to replace men but mostly when accompanied by their nudity.

The ‘tradition’ stereotype limits the scale and scopes of indigenous persons’ capabilities in a rigid indigenous sector. For instance, this classification draws indigenous professionals such as artists to focus solely on indigenous experiences, poets to write only ‘indigenous poems’, political leaders to wonder only about indigenous affairs. Even though politicians, the national and international level politics are taboo for indigenous leaders. Being classified as indigenous, these professionals’ works remain categorically different and as such beyond constructive criticisms that may improve their work. Their works receive nothing but endorsing praise from the dominant non-indigenes, yet run the risk of obvious dismissal in the circles where not the source but the quality matters (see; Smith 1994).

**Conclusion**

A stereotype tremendously suppresses any mobility by indigenous groups in the CHT. In this age of increased connections between ‘different’ peoples and entities, indigenous groups suffer the consequences of portraying a sustained homogeneous past, yet they fear non-recognition in breaking out the stereotype. Given that the emphasis on difference has produced at least partial recognition of indigeneity, now is the time that indigenes in the CHT break free essentialized stereotypes. This will enable indigenes to portray their
disharmony along with unity, variations along with similarities, dynamism along with stativity. This will also reveal the fact that the difference between indigenes and non-indigenes exists not only because indigenes have particular cultures but also because of the existence of the unequal power relations between them-relations that are poised and controlled by the dominant non-indigenes. This reveals ‘tradition’ not only as a ‘cultural repertoire’ but also as a dynamic entity with power relations. ‘Tradition’ not simply as a past, but also what, why, and how we remember the past (see; Nora 1989). ‘Tradition’, then not only signifies the past but also masks power inequalities. The true recognition of indigeneity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts from now on should be realized only by the absence of the over-portrayal of ‘tradition’ than by it; a shift of focus from the recognition of indigeneity as a ‘dehumanized’ category to the emancipation of humanity from such categories.

Notes

1. For a recent definition of culture see Lassiter (2002).
3. I am not denying the necessity of such movements, but arguing that they should be followed by a deconstruction of such rigid dichotomies for the good of indigenes.
4. Popular practice defines indigenousness by the absence or presence of some particular traits (such as Christianity, political leadership etc.) (Miller 2003). Indigeneity is often determined by their conflicting relation with the state; they are vulnerable, backward, and preserve their prior culture. This is the primordial position. This position eliminates some people’s indigenousness as they no longer stay in traditional habitats and economic styles. Defining indigenous people based on their history and culture denies indigenousness to people who have migrated and have changed their lifestyle. Indigenousness can be understood differently from the local and international perspectives, which points to the simplicity and obsoleteness of primordial explanations of indigeneity. Internationally, the focus is on their relationship with the state, colonization, and powerlessness. Locally, they are traced by their history, their alleged threat to the nation-state, and consequent cohesive attempt by the state (Miller 2003).
5. I do not give details of different events in the CHT, but simply refer to them. For details on the events in the CHT consult Mohsin (1997) and Adnan (2004).
6. There are thirteen indigenous groups whose members live in the Tracts.
7. I am referring to the Forest Reserve Acts.
8. I am referring to the 1900 Act.
9. Many of them live struggling lives under difficult conditions in the cities.
10. The British ruled the place from 1760 to 1947. The CHT was under Pakistani authority from 1947-1971. From 1971 it has been a part of Bangladesh.
11. Less powerful kings were denied their authority by the British rulers and were placed under the newly recognized three chiefs only. The British rulers also conglomerated different identities into a single one such as the Kukis (see; Schendel et al. 2001).

12. From a theoretical point of view.

13. For a comprehensive account consult Mohsin (1997) and for a brief account consult Chowdhury (forthcoming).

14. My aim here is not to give a comprehensive account of these features rather to relate them with the imagined bounded ness of the CHT culture. For a comprehensive account refer to Mohsin (1997) and Bhaumik (1997). For a brief account see Chowdhury (forthcoming).

15. I am referring to the decolonization process and the conflict between India and Pakistan regarding it. The CHT’s place in the partition is another point of concern.

16. I am referring to the involvement of the US and the former USSR in the CHT case for their support to Pakistan and India respectively. For details see Mohsin (1997), Bhaumik (1997), and Chowdhury (forthcoming).

17. The link between indigenous leaders and India is the point in reference.

18. The British authorities ignored complex Hill identities. The Pakistani regime tried to Bengalize the Tracts. The Bangladeshi authorities in the beginning denied any nationalities other than the Bengalis in the new state (see; Mohsin 1997; Huq 2000; Adnan 2004).


20. Some of them live in Hillcrests, some on the valleys, and some in between (see; Adnan 2004).


22. The ‘United People’s Democratic Front (UPDF). An indigenous political body mainly opposed to the PCJSS.

23. By erasing a human quality such as conflict.


25. As if king can only be attributed to a full human, and thus, not to the ‘tribals’.

26. For this linguistic exoticization see Smith 1994.

27. “This concept [internal colonization] was used by Marxists like V. I. Lenin and A. Gramsci to describe political and economic inequalities between regions within a given society, by political sociology to characterize the uneven effects of state development on a regional basis, and by race relations theory to describe the underprivileged status and exploitation of minority groups within the wider society. An internal colony produces wealth for the benefit of areas most closely associated with the state. The members of these colonies may be differentiated by ethnicity, religion, language, or some other cultural variable; they are then overtly or covertly excluded from prestigious social and political positions, which are dominated by members of the metropolis” (Abercrombie et al., 2000:183).

28. See Smith 1994

29. For details on analyzing photographic images see Lutz and Collins (1993).
References


