

From Primitive to Preserver: Exploring the Indigenous-Environmental Nexus in Bangladesh's Forest Spaces

My research explores the interaction between indigeneity and environmentalism in Bangladesh's "natural spaces". I argue that the link between advocacy for indigenous land and cultural rights and recognition, and concern for environmental conservation goes beyond their geographic link, and is instead intrinsic to the notion of "being indigenous", while also being contested by "indigenous people" themselves.

Starting with the critique of the constitution of the objects of colonial anthropology as primitive, I argue that an aura of primitivism still persists not only in anthropological accounts, but in NGO and human rights accounts which draw from that anthropological worldview, and which persist also in the very idea of indigeneity. What I seek to explore, among indigenous people themselves as well as at the nexus of interaction between adivasis and organizations who must construct them in ways understandable to donors and the public, is how identity is negotiated and projected, particularly in relation to notions of primitivism, autochthony, and inherent environmental unity.

The Modhupur forest area is a particularly potent site for the exploration of this theme. Modhupur has been constituted as a "protected area" under Forest Department control, and that control has been met with resistance at various intervals. Under the rubric of uncertainty to land title, the Forest Department and logging interests, as well as locals, have deployed this ambiguous space to various ends. In addition to economic exploitation mainly by plantation agriculture (mainly pineapple, banana, turmeric, and woodlot), there have been various forms of resistance by locals to Forest Department control, including multiple oppositions to the establishment of a "proper" national park, resulting in the murder of an "anti-Eco-park" leader by police and forest guards. Recently, not only human rights and environmental organizations, but also Government and the Forest Department, have deployed the international discourse of indigeneity as well as anthropological notions of primitive environmental stewardship to promote programs, increase organizational legitimacy, and to assuage human rights concerns.

Starting from these premises, I explore the link between indigeneity and environmentalism with the Modhupur forest area as a primary site. I conduct extensive interviews and observation among the Mandi (Garo) community, particularly community leaders, teachers, priests, and other members of civil society, and with various NGO and human rights organizations working in Modhupur, some locally-based and others based in Dhaka. Further, I explore Mandi notions of being "modern" as related to drastic changes in lives and livelihoods in recent years, including the Mandi transition to Christianity, and especially the transition to city-based service labor (particularly among women). Via these engagements, as well as extensive explorations of anthropological, colonial, human rights, and tourism literature, I will explore the deeper meanings of the indigenous-environmentalist nexus at a key site of its production in Bangladesh.