

Over the course of twelve months (Sept. '08-Sept. '09), I intend to carry out ethnographic research in a village locale in the area of Kulaura, Maulvi Bazar (Sylhet). During this period I will participate in and observe an ongoing land movement among the indigenous Khasi of this area. By studying land disputes I intend to understand a certain institutional framework of identity formation, the way that indigenous recognition, despite the absence of a legal framework, coheres at the junctures between NGO-s, Christian missions, the state, and everyday social interactions. Furthermore, I ask how this recent means of narrating community identity in indigenous terms is affecting Khasis' experience of belonging in Bangladesh, to what degree indigeneity may reshape yet still reinforce the hegemony of all belonging as national belonging, and how other forms of community (kinship or the institution of village leadership through the headman) do or do not find expression through the language of indigenous activism.

My participation in the land movement will be primarily through the work of the Lokhipur mission and the NGO KUBORAJ, both of which are based in Kulaura. The situating of the land movement within structures of the everyday will be carried out through analysis of video and audio recordings and structured and non-structured interviews attending to norms of language use and interaction at three key sites: the Khasi village of Panai (Kulaura), Catholic Lokhipur mission, and the outdoor market in Kulaura town. In Panai, I will observe and record language use in the Khasi-medium and Bangla-medium classes held in the village primary school to establish values associated with particular codes and their typical spaces of use. At the mission I will survey the archive of land documents there, particularly transcriptions of oral testimony by Khasi villagers involved with past land conflicts, in order to understand the role the mission plays in constructing the Khasi as a discursive object. The market in Kulaura will allow me to observe inter-ethnic interaction in a stereotypically agonistic environment, and of the speech genre of bargaining associated with it to establish the common ways that Bengalis and Khasis construct and maintain social boundaries between one another.