"We Hill Bengalis are deprived": Identity innovation in an Asian Highland borderland

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1 INTRODUCTION

State-making processes, including the state-supported migration of Bengali Muslims into the South-East borderland of Bangladesh (also known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts) have drastically altered the lives of the local, non-Bengali, borderlanders[1]. Where these non-Bengali, non-Muslim communities used to constitute the majority population in the Hills, they are now the minority in their own original habitat. Ever since the emergence of Bangladesh, these local Hill communities (hereafter also referred to as indigenous or ethnic minority communities or minorities) have faced severe consequences of state-making projects including economic development, state-supported transmigration and resettlement projects, and a de facto military occupation. Very recently, however, the Bangladeshi state has modified its policies. Today, the state is less univocally supportive of Bengali Muslims (im)migrants in the Hills, at least according to the Peace Accord that was signed in 1997 between the government of Bangladesh and the politico-military party of the minorities (namely, PCJSS).

According to the Peace Accord, the state partially accommodates the demands of the indigenous Hill communities and grants them a degree of autonomy (VAN SCHENDEL, 2009, p. 27, 213). That is, unlike in the rest of Bangladesh, in the Hills the state continues with some historical regional provisions and administrative arrangements that originated in the British colonial period. One such is a degree of indirect rule by chiefs and rajas of the three *tribal* circles (tribal is the official term used in the Peace Accord for the indigenous minorities); another is a local system of taxation and land rights, and the third is particular forms of representations such as a regional council. However, in practice the Peace Accord has been far from being implemented and the central government, the national ruling political party and the military remain the key authoritative actors in the Hills (MOHSIN, 2003; ADNAN, 2004; IWGIA, 2012; ARENS, 2013, BRAITHWAITE and D'COSTA, 2018; CHAKMA and GERHARZ, 2022).

The Hill communities, the state and the Bengali migrants all have their own - oftentimes distinct - perceptions of the recent transformations. While both the state approach and that of indigenous activists have received significant attention in the recent literature, a detailed analysis of the ideas and perspectives of Bengalis

who have settled in the Hills is still missing. This article draws on ethnographic materials and focuses on the views of the Bengali Muslim (im)migrants on the shifting government strategies. It addresses the following questions: how to conceptualise the Bengali (im)migrants' perceptions of indigenous autonomy in the Hills? Why and under what conditions do (im)migrants oppose or support indigenous autonomy? And what does this do with their self-identification as Bengalis in the Hills?

Reports in national and international media as well as of human rights organisations, generally portray the Bangladeshi state as the protagonist of the Bengali (im)migrants. Bengali (im)migrants are therefore expected to be cheering the state. In this article, we will demonstrate that the current state approach and governance in this borderland, like in many other borderlands, increase insecurity and fear among all inhabitants, also amongst the recent Bengali Muslim (im)migrants (cf. AZAD, 2022). Militarised border control, especially when it takes the shape of intimate surveillance and prying into people's quotidian businesses, does not ease life for the alleged beneficiaries either. Rather, it triggers more conflict, insecurity, anxiety, and distrust amongst and between all communities living in the borderland and further complicates the relationship between the immigrant majority and the indigenous minority communities (cf. BARUAH, 2020). This complex presence of securitisation and the state demonstrates the multiple bordering practices theorised in current attempts to rethink migration studies (SANTOS; Pardue, 2023).

First, let us very succinctly recall the recent history of conflict in the Chittagong Hills. The Hills, located in the South-East border region of Bangladesh, separate the country from Northeast India and Myanmar. They are part of a much larger geographical highland region, also referred to as *Zomia* (VAN SCHENDEL, 2002; SCOTT, 2009). This entire area is characterised by a diverse range of languages, cultures and identities, as well as different forms of conflict, violence, and resistance (see also MICHAUD, 2002; RAMIREZ, 2014; KARLSSON, 2011; BARUAH, 2005; VAN SCHENDEL, 2005). The Chittagong Hills, which constitute a meeting zone of highland(er)s and lowland(er)s, are the traditional home to twelve different ethnic communities. Historically, these non-Bengali, non-Muslim Hill people had closer connections with Highland Asia than with the Bengal deltaic plain, where the Bengalis are the main dwellers. Bengalis from lowland Bengal would enter the Hills for trade and employment purposes, but their immigration was limited (VAN SCHENDEL, 1992; VAN SCHENDEL, MEY and DEWAN, 2000). Recent history, however, brought together local ethnic minority populations with a huge number of Bengali migrants, who settled in the Hills through a state-supported immigration programme in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Since its inception in 1947, the Eastern wing of independent Pakistan was considered, by its political elites, as a Bengali-Muslim dominated region (MOHSIN, 2002). Non-Bengali, non-Muslim communities have suffered from various forms of exclusion and violence by the state ever since. The Bangladeshi state, which

came into being in 1971, continued to exclude ethnic minority communities, for example by the official statement that all Bangladeshis are Bengalis (THE CONSTITUTION OF PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH, PART II, SECTION 9).

In response to the state's exclusion, ethnic minorities in the Hills organised political and armed resistance that fought for regional autonomy. The state interpreted the autonomists as secessionists and launched a counter-insurgency programme in 1976, through which the Hills became flooded with the Bangladeshi army, and two years later, with Bengali Muslim immigrants.

The underlying motives for bringing poor and landless Bengalis to the Hills were three: i) to help and support the (purportedly national) ethnic majority community with land and new opportunities; ii) to make sure that the border region was peopled by those who could be trusted to be patriots, and iii) to better control (or even convert) the untrustworthy indigenous minorities. The scheme fuelled the (armed) conflict, guerrilla activities, violence, insecurity, repression, and strategies to protect the new Bengalis against the original inhabitants – the indigenous minorities.

In the longer run, the Bangladeshi state received increasing national and international criticism. Bangladesh was accused of repression and even systemic and long-term elimination of the Hills' local ethnic minority communities, denying their identities and rights. In response, the state slowly but surely changed its strategy and in 1997, the government signed a treaty with the autonomists. The treaty declared the Hills as a "tribal inhabited region" that recognises the indigenous minorities as the original owners of the lands of the Hills (THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS ACCORD OF 1997). It also, by different provisions of section *Kha*, introduced and sanctioned priority to the Hill District Council (in short Council) and the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs than the government, even the parliament, in protecting the representation, concerns and interests of the *tribals* in the Hills. Additionally, by provision 3 of section *Kha*, the treaty, for the first time formally contested the permanent residency of (any) migrant Bengalis in the Hills. Furthermore, by provision 9 of section *Kha*, it created doubts regarding voting rights of the immigrant Bengalis in selecting the non-tribal/immigrant Bengali members of the Council. This way the treaty has fed the fear of expulsion amongst the Bengali (im)migrants who had been brought (directly or indirectly) by and received protection from the state. This way the treaty has also fuelled the rejection of the signed agreements amongst the (im)migrant Bengalis.

In this article, we have identified a set of critical issues that challenge the common analyses by different human rights organisations of the Bengali (im) migrants' agitation against the Peace Accord. Firstly, we will draw attention to the prevailing notion that (im)migrant Bengalis - considered by the state as the true and loyal citizens- receive state protection against the original inhabitants of the area. We found that the presence of the state in the form of military rule does not always contribute to the sense of safety and security of many

Bengalis in the Hills. Based on our ethnographic materials, we will demonstrate how army presence obstructs the intentions and attempts of the Bengali (im) migrants to accommodate, find arrangements, and build routines of peaceful encounters and exchanges. Secondly - somewhat contradicting and complicating the above observations - some Bengali voices do insist on further unconditional protection by the military and resist any decrease thereof. Thirdly, most researchers (for instance, IWGIA, 2012) assume a unilinear connection between Bengali organisation formation and the unambiguous support of the army. We observed that Bengali organisations and their relations with, and demands and expectations from the state, are more complex than that.

In order to understand this complexity, we have mapped and studied different grassroots organisations and associations that Bengali Muslim (im) migrants have established at the moment that they began to doubt the state's unconditional support. In our ethnographic section, we will demonstrate that members of these organisations simultaneously distance themselves from and engage with state-initiated schemes, law enforcement and identities, while deploying "languages of stateness" (HANSEN and STEPPUTAT, 2001), that refer to the constellation of widespread top-down accounts of governance and authority that dominate the process of contemporary state formation worldwide. We will demonstrate that the Bengali Muslim (im)migrants create small-scale trade - and business-oriented self-help groups that show much more compromise and connection with the indigenous minorities than what state discourse and interventions suggest. However, in this approach, the (im) migrants embrace the idea shared in large parts of the world that the state is the sole protagonist of their safety and security. Often, they interpret their own (public/overt) acts of accommodating indigenous Hill communities as a response to the state's failure or dysfunction to protect its *true* citizens - the Bengalis. Bengali (im)migrants also protest publicly against the state and/ or its policy changes. In that case, they highlight their feelings of fear and deprivation by using the "language of stateness" (HANSEN and STEPPUTAT, 2001) in the form of "border militarisation" (JONES and JOHNSON, 2016) and assert their citizenship to the Hills even more. That is to say, they endorse the state's narrative of sovereignty that highlights its exclusive power and authority (and not a shared sovereignty with indigenous peoples); they support the importance of borders as the last bulwark of sovereign states that need to be protected with heavy border military force and equipment from any intruder and invasion; they agree with the dehumanisation of dissent and/or "*other*" citizens as internal danger and the elimination of them by bringing war logic. They also assert their belonging to the Hills by introducing a new term - *Parbatya Bengalis* (or Hill Bengalis in English) in opposition to *Paharis* (lit. Hill People, including all local indigenous Hill communities) to assert that they are as local as the local indigenous communities, and are not the "non-permanent residents" (as mentioned in the Peace Accord).

2 THE SIMULTANEITY OF RESISTANCE AND ASSISTANCE TO THE STATE

Scholars working on the state have long acknowledged the paradox of populations all over the world challenging the authority of the state and undermining its functionality, while at the same time demanding from the state to fulfil all their safety and security needs. Acknowledging this paradox is vital to grasp "the ambiguities of the state" as both illusory and a set of concrete institutions; distant/impersonal as well as localised/ personified; violent/ destructive as well as benevolent/productive (HANSEN and STEPPUTAT 2001, p. 5). Both scholars also argue that the "modern forms of state are in a continuous process of construction, which takes place through invocation of [a] bundle of widespread and globalised registers of governance and authority, or (...) "language of stateness"" (ibid; see also HANSEN 2001; STEPPUTAT 2001). In other words, they question the binary thinking in which resistance to the state and trust in the state are put in opposition to each other. People also should not be considered as passive victims, but as active agents in the innovation of state's ruling and citizen's entitlements.

These reflections also remind us that there is hardly ever a direct and unequivocal impact or consequence of state policies. In the nearby Indian state of Assam, for instance, the updating project of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) of 1951, (de)stabilises Indian citizenship of the migrant Bengali Muslims, known as Miya community (BARUAH, 2022). In Bolivia, to mention another case, a new constitution to legitimise indigenous rights did not produce enthusiasm amongst all those, who allegedly would also benefit from the change. Rather it is challenged by some indigenous groups (CANESSA, 2014).

People's responses to new state discourses on border security, national or minority identities and rights, will vary according to their assessment of new dangers and new opportunities. In addition, they will also fall back on *old* memories of encounters with the ethnic *others* who had earlier been portrayed as a hazard for national or personal security.

In line with Jonkman (2019) and Uddin and Gerharz (2017), for instance, we argue that the state is not one singular actor. It is unpredictable how formal policies land in real societies and communities. New situations are always co-constituted by unsynchronised state entities that communicate, forward and implement new laws in heterogeneous ways. Local reinterpretations, reconceptualisations and juggling with the perceived consequences of new state policy, play a very important role in this policy realisation.

3 ORGANISATIONS OF AGGRIEVED BENGALIS

This article focuses on grassroots organisations of aggrieved Bengali Muslim (im)migrants and their supporters that were organised in response to the Peace Accord in 1997. These organisations, we believe, are a suitable medium to

study the (formal) reactions of Bengali (im)migrants to new state discourses and priorities. Some of the organisations we studied were already mentioned and researched by others. In our view, however, most reports are incomplete. According to IWGIA (2012), for example, the most prominent organisation of the migrants *Sama-Adhikar Andalan* (Equal Rights Movement) and its student wing *Parbatya Bengali Chatra Parishad* (Hill Bengali Students Council) were established mainly in collaboration with the army and politicians from the pro-military Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). This idea seems to be illustrative of the widespread belief that the BNP, which is one of the two major political parties that dominate national politics, originated from the army, and for its existence still depends on it, as well as on right-wing organisations and religious extremists. This idea also implies that the other dominant national political party Awami League (AL) that presently governs the country, is secular and anti-military (cf. SCHULZ, 2020).

This binary way of thinking is problematic because it presumes that Bengali Muslim migrant organisations in the Hills are simply an extension of one particular political party or state apparatus. Most importantly, it disregards the accounts of the Bengali Muslim (im)migrants who are actually involved with the organisations. In doing so, such analyses decontextualise the conflicts over power and authority in the Hills, between the Bangladeshi army - allegedly biased in favour of protecting Bengali and Islamic idea(l)s and ideologies - and the indigenous movement with demands of autonomy. This history, and the conflicts it embodied, are not the outcome of just one state entity and its followers in the form of local organisations. It is also a history of real people, meeting other real people, and building a life history of good and bad, reconciliatory and conflictive, and approaching and distancing. Rather than state dictums, these life histories inspire people's responses to national political facts.

Hereafter we use our ethnographic materials to investigate the conditions under which the Bengali Muslim (im)migrants' organisations came into being, and what aspects of daily life motivate their members. We will show that the (im)migrants are not organised in one singular way. Besides organisations such as the Equal Rights Movement and the Hill Bengali Student Council, they have also arranged themselves in many self-help grassroots organisations. In joining these, Bengali Muslim (im)migrants express a whole series of individual interests. In addition, they in various degrees, share a collective frustration that the state and the political leaders, whom they believed to be Bengali-Muslim-centric, were failing to protect them. They perceive the introduction of indigenous minorities' relative autonomy as real danger and local existential threat. Hence, a more in-depth examination of such organisations on a case-by-case basis provides a better understanding of the complex interethnic and societal-state relationships in the Hills.

4 BENGALI RESPONSES TO NEW STATE POSITIONS: COMPROMISING WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Our research reveals that the migrants in the Hills were, and still are, largely organised in dozens of *samabay samity*, a term that can be translated as informal cooperatives or savings groups. These *samabay samity* organisations were mainly initiated and constructed by (im)migrant labourers and petty traders of various informal sectors such as tricycle rickshaw pullers and cart or van pushers, construction workers, seasonal fruit vendors, betelnut, leaves, and tobacco shop owners, and motorised vehicle owners and drivers. Many of these organisations had begun to assemble their members long before the implementation of the Bengali population relocation scheme, at a time when the inter-community relations between the Bengali Muslim (im)migrants and the indigenous minorities were less fraught[2]. The motorised vehicle owners' and drivers' association is the oldest organisation started by Bengali Muslim (im)migrants. We discovered they also had members from the local ethnic minority communities. The inclusion of minorities in the Bengali organisation indicates that the relations between the (im)migrants and the locals were not quite oppositional and adversary. However, we also found that in the early 21st century, the indigenous people established a separate association of motorised vehicle owners and drivers, as they felt the (im)migrants' association was becoming too dominant in the transport business sector. It remains unclear in how far migration-accompanying state discourses stimulated the creation of a separate association of the indigenous minorities.

Despite regular disbanding, the migrants still look for a way to stick together with similar people, as they grapple with uncertainty and their unfamiliarity with the Hills. In several interviews, they emphasised that since the population relocation scheme had recruited participants not from one region, but from all over the country, most (im)migrants were strangers to one another. At the beginning of the implementation of the relocation scheme, thus, they sometimes distrusted each other and quarrelled because of this, while at the same time understanding that despite their differences, they still shared certain commonalities, such as their ethnic and religious identities, as well as their impoverishment. The Hills today are also home to many regional associations. The associations based on employment or trade also gradually became more popular amongst them, because like the regional associations, they provided a strong network to influence employers and to negotiate wages in the Hills. A state that communicated Bengali similarities, instead of emphasising internal heterogeneity, and focused on ethnic and religious differences with the indigenous locals possibly also helped strangers to easily become friends.

However, while ensuring economic security was critical, it was not the only reason why (im)migrants organised themselves into these associations. Our interlocutors repeatedly told us that the organisations helped both to prevent

confrontation with activists from regional indigenous groupings, and to facilitate agreement on aspects of small-scale trade. Bengali organisations thus were vehicles for a smoother exchange with the indigenous locals. Throughout our fieldwork, we observed the existence of interactions which reflected a mutual respect between (im)migrant Bengalis and indigenous peoples, despite their unequal power relations. Moreover, in the savings groups of members of the informal economy, as well as in various economic and political endeavours, collaboration across ethnic boundaries was conspicuous. So, although the organisations were primarily based on economic hardship and ethnic identities, it was not a medium to set the (im) migrant Bengalis apart from the indigenous communities. In the following passage, we will introduce Abu Isa, and provide excerpts from a conversation between him and Nasrin, to further illustrate this idea.

Abu Isa, a Bengali Muslim immigrant, spent almost his whole life in the Hills and when Nasrin met him, he was almost thirty years old. He owned a motorcycle and provided transportation services to the daily commuters in the Hills. He was a member of the motorised vehicle owners and drivers' association. One day, while Nasrin was travelling on the back of his motorcycle from Khagrachhari to Rangamati, he explained to Nasrin why he found it necessary to stick together with other Bengali motorcycle drivers and owners like himself in the Hills.

> Sometimes the indigenous activists demonstrate on the roads or block them. So, we need to coordinate with other motorcycle drivers to stay updated about the situation of the roads. Sometimes an ordinary demonstration can turn violent and escalate to an ethnic riot. So, we need to move very carefully on the roads to protect our lives and our motorcycles. Sometimes, when we encounter motorcycle stealing or robbery on the road, the samity leaders use their connections to recover it.

Although Abu Isa had received armed training from the military, he believed that problems with indigenous activists on the roads could better be resolved peacefully through civility and speaking in their languages, and most importantly, by convincing them that he was not a collaborator of the Bangladesh military. Considering the de facto military rule in the Hills, Nasrin was surprised by his perspective. She asked why he thought the connection with the military would bring trouble for him and why did he not consider the military as the provider of security? Abu Isa responded astonished:

> Huh, how can they [the military] protect us when they are busy protecting themselves [from the indigenous rebels and from joblessness] and hiding inside their camps [in fear of indigenous political activists]!

Local organisations, overall, seem to function in such a way that they enable interactions rather than increase antagonisms between (im)migrant Bengalis and indigenous citizens – even though interethnic relations are often not intimate, and multi-ethnic organisations are not the rule.

Mohammad Asgar, another motorcycle driver, aged 26, told Nasrin almost the same thing. In addition, he explained how different power holders share their authority regarding vehicle movement on Hills roads. According to him, one driver gets receipts (tokens to prove that he paid for the right to drive there) from different parties, such as from indigenous autonomists as well as from the Bangladeshi police. This ensures free movement without harassment from either party. The motorised vehicle owners' and drivers' *samity* itself coordinates the collection of the money from each driver and the distributions of the receipts amongst them. It also pays courtesy visits to the two parallel authorities when changes in leadership or officers in charge take place. However, the system in place does not mean that the military do not pay attention to vehicles and people's movements on the roads of the Hills. When they were crossing a river, Mohammad Asgar received calls from the military to inquire about Nasrin's whereabouts. The calls did not bother him and he told Nasrin that it was a routine check. Nasrin very often encountered these kinds of routine checks on the roads in the Hills, in non-governmental offices, and even in government facilities like the public hospital. The incidents indicate that the state forces were active in surveillance, no matter what informal system the *samity* and different state actors and indigenous autonomists were following.

During our fieldwork it was intriguing to observe that the Bengali (im) migrants were less critical of the informal payments to state agents such as the police than to indigenous parties. The latter they considered unacceptable and a form of extortion. For instance, in one conversation with a construction supervisor, he shared with Nasrin that he was once captured by one of the autonomists' parties because he had not paid them for the right to work and thus had broken the agreement between the *samity* and the autonomists. His family and colleagues submitted a request to the military to rescue him, as one would do in a *normal* state situation. The state agents, however, could not help him. He was freed only after the agreed tax was paid to the autonomists via the *samity*. According to the supervisor:

> They (the indigenous autonomists) are not afraid of the police or the military. Rather it is the opposite. If you hear any story of the military rescuing anybody, that means the military has already paid the ransom. Otherwise, the dead body (of the defaulter) would be found. They (the autonomists) do not torture. That is not their objective. The collection of the tax by creating fear is their objective.

The distrust of state actors like the police and the military to ensure justice and social order has not been limited to male Bengali migrants. One of our female respondents, a resident of one of the settlers' villages, regularly complained that wife-beating and sexual harassment by male villagers were routine happenings. Appeals to police and military did not bring any solution, which encouraged men to become even more violent. Many times, she expressed to Nasrin her wish to form a women's *samity*, through which women could organise themselves and punish the male perpetrators. While women were suffering gender-based violence and from a lack of protection, they often came forward to rescue their husbands, brothers and other male counterparts, particularly from the police. The same respondent, for instance, shared with Nasrin that women from settlers' villages were actively involved in resisting the police when they came to the village to arrest those allegedly involved in racial violence against indigenous minorities. According to her, the allegations were not always true, and the cases were often staged by the powerholders to harass or eliminate political opponents.

Nevertheless, police and army power were not seen as equal. The following interview excerpt explains it in a meticulous way. It illustrates how Bengali migrants view the army as the sole representative of the nation and abide by the sovereignty of the state. Any harm to the army means harming the nation, the state as well as the sovereignty of the state.

> The riot broke out because one indigenous woman slapped a man in an army uniform in the bazaar. She accused the man of sexual harassment. But raising one's hand to an army personnel is like raising your arms against state independence and sovereignty. Bengalis [the nation who fought for Bangladesh's liberation in 1971] cannot tolerate that.

Many respondents expressed distrust of any party charged with maintaining socio-economic and political order in the Hills, such as the autonomists, the police and the army. One respondent told Nasrin that the autonomists are making a lot of money by collecting the so-called taxes and by building luxurious houses abroad in preparation for migration. Likewise, the army was accused of making plenty of money from the ration distribution and by sustaining the conflicts in the Hills through creating factions amongst the autonomists and setting up one indigenous party against another (this is also evident in BRAITHWAIT and D'COSTA, 2018).

5 BENGALI RESPONSES TO NEW STATE POSITIONS: INNOVATION OF HILL BENGALI IDENTITY

In the previous section, we addressed how Bengali migrants in the Hills cope with a situation in which - in their perspective - the state fails to ensure

their day-to-day security. They do this by organising self-help groups and unions that facilitate cross-ethnic conversations, degrees of collaboration and synchronisation – even if real friendships remain far away. This also means that they do not aim to correct the state, nor do they demand to change or abolish the Peace Accord.

This section analyses a very different kind of response from the Bengali (im) migrants, in which the (im)migrants make use of the "language of stateness" (HANSEN and STEPPUTAT, 2001) that is particularly entangled with "border militarisation" (JONES and JOHNSON, 2016). In this approach, indigenous minorities are perceived as the *(internal) enemy of the state*, and as the *other*. Bengali (im)migrants, on the other hand, portray themselves as the *true* citizens of the state, and accordingly demand from the state its (exclusive) protection and expect the use of force and even violence against the *problems* (i.e., the indigenous minorities). Their state-confronting activism includes public demonstrations to influence the imagined decision makers, such as the Bangladeshi educated middle class, district administrators, and members of parliament. This approach undeniably adds fuel to the antagonism between the Bengali (im)migrants and the local indigenous communities.

In the following section, we will explore the concerns regarding safety and security that Bengali migrants in the Hills commonly share. These concerns are often expressed through opposition to indigenous autonomy or the idea of a "parallel state" (in their words). They actively rally Hill Bengalis against these notions, organising and mobilising their identity. They believe that due to alleged state support for indigenous autonomy, they have lost their favoured position in the region. Consequently, they fear being unable to continue their (illegal) occupation of land and settlements, eventually facing displacement from the Hills. Unlike the previous section that highlighted a more accommodating attitude among the (im)migrants, the narratives discussed in the following subsections portray an attitude of incompatibility and conflicts that also exist within the region.

6 THE EFFECT OF WAR ON HILL BENGALI IDENTITY INNOVATION

Many researchers have documented the importance of wartime memories in identity formation and solidification. Nasreen (2017), for instance, has reported the impact of the Hills' war, which took place from 1976 to 1997 between the Bangladeshi military and the minority autonomists, on the shaping of the imaginaries of indigenous people and their identities, especially of indigenous women. Elsewhere (BAL and SIRAJ, 2017), we have demonstrated in detail that Bengali (im)migrants refer to the stories of suffering and uprooting during the war to justify their claims to indigeneity in the Hills (and of the country for that matter). When conducting interviews with the Hill Bengali Student Council members, similar kinds of stories about their experience of *atyachar* (tyranny)

were shared with Nasrin, to emphasise the (im)migrants' actual and imaginary victimhood during the war.

According to unofficial estimates, thirty thousand Bengali migrants died in the war. However, our conversations with people who had experienced and survived the war revealed an ambiguous and complex situation. For instance, many respondents explained that the indigenous autonomists' attacks on Bengali (im)migrants were a result of the misbehaviour by Bengali (im)migrants themselves, which included stealing indigenous communities' fruits, crops, and cattle, and sexually harassing the women. Many interlocutors also criticised the wrongdoings by the powerful amongst them, such as the leaders of village level paramilitary platoons, who had angered the indigenous autonomists in the first place. According to many Bengali survivors, they had in fact survived because their indigenous neighbours and friends directly and indirectly warned them to stay away from their villages on the actual date of indigenous autonomists' operations. They survived because the indigenous combatants gave Bengali migrants time to seek for shelter behind nearby bushes. This once again illustrates that the region is *not* an example of successful state-promoted rivalry between two internally homogeneous groups with incompatible perceptions of their worlds. Again, it turns out to be the often differing and even contradictory reconstruction of events and of people's fates, that is decisive for their current assessment of the conflict, including new state policies and discourses.

We also interviewed ex-combatants of the indigenous autonomy politico-military movement. Their accounts suggest that the indigenous military force (namely, *Shanti Bahini*) had conducted one so-called insurgency attack on the state-constructed villages (*settler's villages,* according to our interlocutors) for the (im)migrants only in 1986, in which not more than 2000 combatants were involved. The insurgency was not the long-standing, massive and bloody war that some state accounts suggest. One ex-combatant told us that the operation was conducted strategically to create fear among the (im)migrants, so that they would evacuate the Hills "spontaneously". Even if this is not exactly talking about allies, neither does it point to attempts to eliminate whole populations.

The impact of the autonomists' actions, however, had a mixed outcome. While some Bengali migrants decided to leave the Hills, many chose to stay. Furthermore, a sense of unity was reinforced through shared experiences and a common history, which included memories and stories of Bengali victimisation. These narratives were repeatedly told and circulated, playing a crucial role in fostering a collective mobilisation among Hill Bengalis, highlighting their victimhood and connection to the region. In these accounts, the storytellers adopted the language of the state, framing indigenous resistance as "insurgency" and the military's actions against minorities as "counter-insurgency." They conveyed a narrative that portrayed Bengali (im)migrants sacrificing their lives to combat disloyal tribals in the Hills, who were seen as a threat to the unity and sovereignty of Bangladesh. Therefore, the recent policy shift by the state to

allow some level of autonomy for indigenous minorities was viewed as a national defeat and a victory for the minorities. This also meant the resurgence of an (imagined) tyranny by indigenous minorities over Bengali (im)migrants, akin to wartime conditions.

7 THE EFFECT OF THE PEACE ACCORD ON HILL BENGALI IDENTITY INNOVATION

Beside the alleged tyranny of the indigenous autonomists, the feeling of betrayal by the state as manifested in different clauses of the Peace Accord also played an important role in the mobilisation of a sense of Hill Bengali collectivity. Almost all Bengali (im)migrants in the Hills looked at this state policy change as the ultimate threat to their mere existence in the region and they expressed anxiety about being expelled from the Hills.

The most contentious clause of the Peace Accord, as identified by our interlocutors, was the establishment of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council, which aimed to address the autonomists' demand for decentralisation of government in the Hills. The Accord officially identifies the Hills as a *tribal inhabited* region and consequently recognises the authority of three *tribal chiefs*. It also gives priority to the *tribal communities* in the election of council members, the chairman, and the chief executive officer of the regional council. However, in practice, the central state and the ruling party still exert control over the regional council by selecting indigenous members affiliated with the ruling Bengali party (Awami League). Nevertheless, the recognition in the Peace Accord of the Hills' indigenous peoples as *the locals* triggered a sense of threat among Bengali (im)migrants, who feared for the security of their settlements in the Hills.

In their protest against the state's recognition of the Hills, activists from the Hill Bengali Student Council primarily direct their attention towards Bengalis in positions of power within the government. They openly criticize and target prominent state institutions such as district commissioners, (potential) members of Parliament, and the Supreme Court. When publishing documents aimed at influencing decision makers, they primarily rely on two clauses from the Constitution as their main points of reference.

First, "all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law", and second, "the state shall not discriminate against any citizens on the basis of ethnicity, religion etc" (THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH).

Bengali (im)migrants commonly express opposition to another provision of the Peace Accord, which pertains to the recognition of customary indigenous land tenure in the Hills. During interviews, our interlocutors conveyed their fear that this particular clause would legitimise their eventual eviction from the Hills, intensifying their concerns. This fear was underscored by pointing to the

provision of the Peace Accord that allows the *tribal chiefs* to determine the status of the actual *non-tribal permanent resident* of the Hills. In their explanation, state-questioning activists said that the land occupation of the Bengali migrants should not be adjudicated by *tribal chiefs* as this undermines the authority of the Bangladeshi state. In these discussions, the notion of indigenous land tenure was frowned upon and rejected, with the *tribal chiefs* framed as *primitive*. Bengali land tenure arrangements, on the other hand, were labelled as *civilised*. The notion that indigenous peoples had suffered displacement was also ridiculed. Many respondents told us that "they were not settled in one place" and that "they were always on the move from hill to hill" (see also BAL and SIRAJ 2017). The state scheme of Bengali population relocation in the Hills, consequently, was viewed as introducing the only legitimate land ownership policy.

8 THE EFFECT OF DEMILITARISATION ON HILL BENGALI IDENTITY INNOVATION

Finally, reference in the Peace Accord to military withdrawal from the Hills has also played an important role in adopting the Hill Bengali collective identity. As stated earlier, our focus is not on the actual implementation of the treaty and the role of the state in it but on the Bengalis' perceptions of the measures and the effects they anticipate and fear. In their protests, the activists who question the role of the state, demand its support for the building of new camps for the military divisions assigned to protect the border. Furthermore, they object against the provisions of the Peace Accord that would result in the withdrawal of a range of temporary military camps. These Bengali protesters fear that without the intensive presence of the military in the region, their community will face expulsion from the Hills. In different interviews and conversations, this fear was expressed through statements such as: "The Bengalis would not survive in the Hills even for a day if the military left". Our interlocutors would also emphasise that the Bengali (im)migrants were still in a state of war with indigenous minorities. Simultaneously, interactions in quotidian encounters continue. In most of their demonstrations, Hill Bengali activists highlight the kind of state discourses that legitimate militarisation of the Hills, saying that "the Bangladeshi army is the sole agent of security and sovereignty in Bangladesh" and that the state of Bangladesh should allow one army constituted by, and for Bengalis alone.

9 CONCLUSION

Adopting a bottom-up ethnographic approach to the concepts of state and citizenship, this article sought to address three key questions. Firstly, we aimed to identify the vocabulary employed by Bengalis to express their concerns and

vulnerability following recent shifts in state policies that promise to share power and authority with indigenous autonomists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In this regard, terms such as equality and non-discrimination based on ethnicity or religion were frequently used, although their perspectives often rested on the paradoxical assumption that the Bengali Muslim majority would be the primary beneficiaries of such equality. Secondly, we explored the expectations held by Bengali (im)migrants from the state. We found that they perceived the state as biased, weak, corrupt, and indecisive, consequently failing to provide the necessary security and protection for them in the Hills since the signing of the Peace Accord. Lastly, the article delved into the specific images of the state and citizenship cherished by Bengali (im)migrants in the Hills. It examined how these images contribute to the construction of their sense of belonging to the Hills.

During our field work, we actively interacted with several Bengali grassroots organisations. Through analysing the perspectives and experiences of Bengalis who were directly or indirectly involved with these local organisations, we discovered a complex dynamic in which they simultaneously (needed to) both trust and distrust the state regarding its ability to ensure their safety and security (cf. HANSEN and STEPPUTAT, 2001).

Despite the official demilitarisation process initiated in the Hills following the signing of the Peace Accord in 1997, the reality on the ground still reflects a significant presence of border militarisation in the region (cf. JONES and JOHNSON, 2016). The interpretation of this ongoing armed state presence, however, is ambiguous.

It has led to a prevailing belief among Bengali (im)migrants that the Peace Accord establishes a form of parallel regulation or even legal support for the indigenous populations. Their expectations, which they previously took for granted and cherished, regarding the absolute sovereignty and comprehensive nature of the Bengali ethnic nation and the Bangladeshi state, have been disrupted by the Accord. In response, they have introduced alternative constitutional and legal terms, such as identifying themselves as Hill Bengalis, to challenge the state's new position.

In sum, this article aimed to present various perspectives of Bengali (im) migrants regarding the 1997 Peace Accord, which promises a degree of self-autonomy for indigenous communities in the Hills. According to these perspectives, the Peace Accord is seen as favouring indigenous peoples at the expense of Bengali Muslim (im)migrants residing in the Hills. Consequently, this has led to feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and mistrust. However, it has also sparked the emergence of new forms of self-organisation and identification among Bengali (im)migrants in the Hills, as they strive to navigate the changing socio-political dynamics in the border region.

NOTES

1 The ethnographic materials on which this article is based were primarily collected by Nasrin as part of her PhD project. She and her supervisor Ellen Bal visited all three Hill districts together. Nasrin chose to base herself in Khagracchari where one can find the largest concentration of Bengali Muslim (im)migrants in the Hills. She lived in this town from August 2013 to September 2014 while conducting her fieldwork. During her fieldwork she focused largely on the Bengali (im)migrants. Ellen visited Nasrin in Khagracchari three times. Together they made different field visits and had several informal conversations with locals. Ton Salman, Nasrin's co-supervisor, joined Nasrin and Ellen in one of the follow-up visits to Khagracchari in 2016. Since the region has been experiencing severe ethnic tension and intense military presence, we were cautious about our own safety and security as well as of our interlocutors, and carefully protected our notes and tapes. Foreigners need special permission to enter the Hills. We managed the permission via our influential indigenous friends living in the capital, Dhaka. As a Bangladeshi national, Nasrin did not need any permit to live and work in the Hills.

2 Many Bengali Muslim refugees and displaced people migrated into remote areas such as the Chittagong Hill Tracts after the split of the Bengal delta between India and Pakistan (later Bangladesh) in 1947 (see also ALEXANDER et al, 2016). In the Hills, these Bengali Muslim (im)migrants are known as *Adi*-Bengalis (old immigrants). In Khagracchari we found five such families. Beside state-sponsored (im)migrants and old or *Adi* migrants, however, there are many 'self-reliant' Bengali migrants who settled in the Hills on their own account. They started to move into the Hills after the Pakistan regime lifted the ban on Bengali migration into the Hills. These Bengalis identify themselves as local (*sthaniyo* in Bengali) Bengalis (for more details see SIRAJ and BAL, 2017).

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RESUMO

No mundo contemporâneo, a importância da política de identidade é cada vez mais proeminente, particularmente no domínio da governação e da reivindicação de direitos e prerrogativas por parte do Estado. O presente trabalho de investigação centra-se na zona fronteiriça do sudeste do Bangladesh, onde indivíduos com origens étnicas diversas têm estado envolvidos em processos de inclusão e exclusão para fazer valer os seus direitos. Historicamente, esta zona fronteiriça foi o lar ancestral de doze comunidades "tribais" distintas. Contudo, em resultado dos esforços de construção do Estado, estas comunidades foram gradualmente marginalizadas politicamente e ultrapassadas em número pela comunidade maioritária nacional, os muçulmanos bengalis. Este artigo centra-se especificamente na mudança de atitude do Estado, que recentemente passou de uma atitude pró-bengali pura e simples para uma política que sanciona oficialmente as reivindicações das populações tribais ou montanhesas locais no sentido de um certo grau de autonomia. Esta mudança levou ao aparecimento de numerosas organizações que representam os recém-chegados bengalis, que procuram dar resposta às suas preocupações em matéria de segurança e de sentimento de pertença na região. Com base num ano de investigação etnográfica, este artigo explora as origens destas organizações e as motivações que levam os seus membros a aderir. Argumentamos que a interação entre a presença e as intervenções do Estado na região e as interações cotidianas entre as comunidades locais das montanhas e os imigrantes bengalis dão origem a um vasto leque de estratégias inovadoras, algumas das quais visam apaziguar, enquanto outras facilitam o conflito. As estratégias bengalis e, em particular, a invenção de uma identidade "Hill" bengali refletem os sentimentos de insegurança e exclusão vividos pelas maiorias migrantes na região.

Palavras-chave: Fronteiras; Militarism; (In)segurança; Inovação identitária; Chittagong Hill Tracts no Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary world, the significance of identity politics is increasingly prominent, particularly in the realm of governance and the assertion of rights and entitlements from the state. This research paper focuses on the South-eastern borderland of Bangladesh, where individuals with diverse ethnic backgrounds have been involved in processes of inclusion and exclusion to assert their rights and entitlements. Historically, this borderland served as the ancestral home of twelve distinct 'tribal' or hill communities. However, as a result of state-building efforts, these communities gradually became politically marginalised and outnumbered by the national majority community, the Bengali Muslims. This paper specifically focuses on the shifting attitude of the state, which has recently transitioned from a straightforward pro-Bengali attitude to a policy that officially sanctions the local tribal or hill people's demands for a certain degree of self-autonomy. This change has led to the emergence of numerous organisations representing Bengali newcomers, who seek attention for their concerns regarding security and a sense of belonging in the region. Drawing on one year of ethnographic research, this paper explores the origins of these organisations and the motivations that drive their members to join. We argue that the interplay between the state presence and interventions in the region and the day-to-day interactions between the local hill communities and Bengali immigrants give rise to a wide range of innovative strategies, some of which aim to appease while others facilitate conflict. The Bengali strategies and particularly the invention of a Hill Bengali identity reflect the feelings of insecurity and exclusion experienced by the migrant-majorities in the region.

Keywords: State-border; Border-militarisation; (In)security; Identity innovation; Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh