



## **UNDERSTANDING FORMATION OF IDENTITIES: THE CASE OF THE *KHYANG* IN CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS OF BANGLADESH**

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The *Khyang* is one of the smaller ethnic communities within the Chittagong Hill Tracts where people from different ethnic groups such as *Bawm*, *Chak*, *Chakma*, *Khyang*, *Khumi*, *Lushai*, *Marma*, *Mro*, *Pangkhua*, *Tanchangya*, and *Tripura* live including the majority group of the country the *Bangalee* people. My research focuses on how *Khyang* identity is formed, how they talk and think about their own group as well as other groups, and find out transformations in identity expressions. I collected the field material for the paper from *Bandarban* and *Rangamati* of Chittagong Hill Tracts through participant observation. The findings indicate that among the *Khyang* emergence of situational identities is pre-dominant and it is a transformed consciousness based on the complex web of personal relations/networks. Sometimes, among the older generation, the memory of their past existence still remains as a part of their identity. Further, a kind of collaboration or symbiosis is seen among the *Khyang* with the others living in the locality in regard to identity ascriptions. Therefore, on the basis of my ethnographic findings I argue that stereotypes and groupings are not fixed rather depend on perceived relationships among different ethnic groups; how they relate to those people at the moment categorization.

**Keywords:** Identity, *Khyang*, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh.

### **Introduction**

There have always been internal tensions and inconsistencies among the various identities and group memberships of individuals (Calhoun 1994). Individuals negotiate their identities within the interaction order and present an image of themselves (of self) for acceptance by others (Jenkins 2008). Further, the more people have to do with each other in everyday life, the more likely they will be to identify each other as fellow individuals, rather than primarily by reference to their collective identifications (Jenkins 2008). Ethnic identity is further marked by a group's distinctiveness and the recognition of common cultural, linguistic, religious, behavioral or biological traits, real or presumed, as indicators of contrast to other groups and it can make differences in interaction and social relationship (Eriksen 2001; 1993). Further, Barth (1969) referred ethnicity as ideas perpetually negotiated and renegotiated by both external ascription and internal self-identification. Therefore, the focus of this article is on how, when, and why different markers of ethnic identity become salient.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh could be a useful site to understand how 'identities' are produced and reproduced. The Chittagong Hill Tracts is situated in the southeast corner of Bangladesh. It is about 10 percent of the land area of Bangladesh. In this region people from different ethnic groups such as *Bawm*, *Chak*, *Chakma*, *Khyang*, *Khumi*, *Lushai*, *Marma*, *Mro*, *Pangkhua*, *Tanchangya*, and *Tripura* live including the majority group of the country the *Bangalee* people.

Throughout history minority people have been treated as *Pahari*- people living in hills- by the neighboring *Bangalee* communities, while these communities claim to be the indigenous people of that area having their own individual cultural history (Chowdhury 2008). The *Khyang* are one of the ethnic minority communities living in the CHT. My paper particularly focuses on the formation and expression of *Khyang* identities. Specifically, how *Khyang* identity is formed, how they talk and think about their own group as well as other groups, and find out transformations in identity expressions.

### ***Khyang* of CHT**

The *Khyang* is one of the smaller ethnic communities within the CHT. *Khyang* have the same origin as the Chin of Burma; *Khyang* language is similar to that of the southern Chin with a partial influence of the Burmese language (Shafie 2000). According to Adnan (2004) the total *Khyang* population in Bangladesh is 1900.

There are two kinds of *Khyang* communities, the *Kongtu Khyang* and the *Laitu Khyang* (Chapola 2009). The *Kongtu Khyang* lives on top of the mountains and have mostly converted to Christianity (Seventh-Day Adventists) from Buddhism while the *Laitu Khyang* lives in the plain land of the valleys in CHT and they are mostly Buddhist. *Laitu Khyang* people are involved in plough cultivation, while *Kongtu Khyang* people are more dependent upon shifting cultivation (*Jhum*) because of living at high altitude (Chapola 2009).

There is no other population in the entire region who has been as badly affected by the expansion of reserved forests and plantations as the *Khyang* (Chapola 2009). Life became extremely difficult for them after the British Government had imposed a ban on *Jhum* cultivation in 1900. The ban has been continued but being enforced strictly since 2009 (World Food Programme 2011: 4). Some *Khyang* families have developed fruit garden, some earn their income by selling labor in plantations while many families rely on a very small income from collecting and selling fuel wood, bamboo, etc. (Chapola 2009).

The *Khyang* require vast land for *Jhum* but they have been losing their land because of expansion of the reserved forest and construction of government driven hydroelectric project in the Kaptai Lake (Uddin 2008). In some instances, entire *Khyang* villages have disappeared (Adnan 2004 and Schendel et al. 2001). The precarious conditions of the *Khyang* are no exception from other indigenous communities in the CHT due to insurgency, counter-insurgency, militarization, and *Bengali* settlement (Adnan 2004; Schendel et al. 2001; Mohsin 1997; 2003). These forces allegedly invoked armed resistance by different ethnic groups and the Bangladesh government responded to the resistance by means of military operation. However, after decades of violence in CHT a peace accord was signed in 1997 (Barkat et. al. 2009).

In this backdrop, different ethnic groups of CHT including the *Khyang* are in competition with *Bengali* people and complying with the government and non-government policies to make use of the available resources to sustain livelihood. Therefore, I analyze and discuss the diversified interrelations between different ethnic communities living in the CHT. Further, in relation to the socio-economic endeavors, how the *Khyang* negotiate and sustain identity within and outside the immediate ethnic groups is explored.

### **Field Locations and Methodology**

I collected the field material from two places of the CHT. The geography of the region, in contrast to the rest of the country's plains, is comprised of hills, valleys, and a dense semi tropical monsoon forest. CHT is comprised of three districts known as *Rangamati*, *Bandarban*, and *Khagrachhari*. My research field sites are located in *Bandarban* and *Rangamati district*.

The locality in *Bandarban* where I have done fieldwork is about 15 kilometer away from the town center and three kilometers away from the nearest road that goes to the town center. The area has no electricity and from the nearest road junction to the village one generally has to walk but occasionally one

may reserve mini-taxi or motorbike. People of the *Khyang* community here are follower of Buddhism. Mostly they are plain land cultivators thus they are the *LaituKhyang*. However, there are people with other occupations also, such: small business (shop owner), school teacher, non-government officials, and daily laborers. It is to be noted that these occupation generally supplement their income from agriculture. Another distinctive feature of this area is that the neighbors of the *Khyang* cluster of houses are mostly *Bangalee* Muslim.

On the other hand, the area in *Rangamati* is within a kilometer of a major road junction to *Rangamati* Town, *Bandarban* Town, Chittagong City and *Karnafully* Paper Mills. There is a high level of activity virtually all day. There is a bus terminal, taxi stand, commercial bank, big market place, ferry to cross *Karnafully* river, commercial banks, hospital, industries, abundance of shops and stalls where a great variety of commodities are sold. People of the *Khyang* community here are follower of Baptist Church. Traditionally they were *Jhum* cultivators (shifting cultivation) and regard themselves as *KongtuKhyang*. When they settled in this area around 1900 they have gradually stopped cultivation, however, in present days none of the *Khyang* living here are engaged with any sort of agricultural production but few of them cultivate fruits in homestead garden for consumption. People here have diverse occupations, including: doctor, accountant, medical technician, nurses, cook, cleaner, security guard, beautician, garments worker, daily labor, shop owner, non-government officials, etc. People of this area are more politically active and there is an elected *Khyang* member in the local government body. *Khyang* of the *Rangamati* live at close contact with different ethnic groups such as: *Bangalee*, *Marma*, *Chakma*, *Tanchangya*, etc. However, Bengali people living in adjacent areas are either Christian or Hindu.

None of my field sites are in any respect is a bounded system. The personal networks of inhabitants have so many dispersed interrelations. However, *Khyang* of the *Rangamati* have more non-local linkages than the *Khyang* of the *Bandarban*. In addition, their social identities are partly defined through their engagement with other ethnic groups, mass political organizations and institutions of national scale, which contribute to the creation of shared understanding and situational or segmentary identities.

In the field initially, I have tried try to come into contact with different ethnic communities and talk to people randomly from streets, markets, tea stalls, bus stops, etc. I have participated in informal gatherings of different groups of people and specially the *Khyang* with an intention to get information about the local networks and how they interact with others and amongst themselves (Barth 1983). During my stay in the villages, I have been a participant observer among the *Khyang*. In fact, I had passed time sitting, asking, listening and participating in their daily activities with the intention to collection information about the economic activities of the households and how they makes sense of themselves and others in everyday life.

### **Situational Identities of the *Khyang***

In this paper I explore how identity is conceptualized and stereotyped in societies which are continuously interacting and going through symbolic integration but apparently marked by a discrete symbolic universe and systems of practices. In anthropological literature studies of urbanization and interethnic encounters mostly focus on aspects of instrumental action and situational selection of statues, taking place between agents of diverse cultural origin, who were thrown together on a shared industrial workplace (Wilson 1942; Mitchell 1956; Epstein 1958; Gluckman 1961). In present world, these works are of imperative importance in understanding how new shared meaning can be developed through interaction between people of distinct cultural origins. In this situation, individual may behave as tribesman in one situation but not in another (Mitchell 1966:59).

To explore how situational identities are produced and used I have started by mapping out what Adrian Mayer (1966) has called action-sets, that is the ego-centered first-order linkages, to use the terminology of network theory (Eriksen 1992). The purpose was finding out who does what with whom and for which purposes. However, this was not an exhaustive exploration considering the sheer hugeness of the entire network (ibid). Therefore, purposive selection was made in locating persons, or key

informants covering a wide range regarding profession and age (there will be an apparent male bias because of the *Khyang* being a patriarchal society).

*ThoiKhyang* is a middle-aged person living at *Rangamati* and follows Christianity; he lives in a house built in a land leased by the Christian Hospital and lives there with his wife and two daughters. He works as an administrative officer at the Christian Hospital. His elder daughter is a dental medical student, lives in another district and younger daughter studies in higher secondary level in a nearby college. Further, his wife (ethnically *Bangalee*) is a staff nurse in government hospital and they both run a medical center. His action-set has five main components, excluding his nuclear family: kin, affine, neighbors, colleagues and patients/ customers. His kin, notably his siblings, live in the other areas of *Rangamati*; his affine live in different parts of the country and also in the capital city. *ThoiKhyang* and his family visit both categories at special occasions. His closest neighbors are mostly *Khyang* and *Bangalee* Christian and Hindu. He participates in the Baptist prayer meetings on a regular basis. His and her wife's colleagues include Muslims, Christian, Hindu, other ethnic minority groups and also *Khyang* and he frequently engages in lively discussions at work, concerning the state of the country, public events or the situation at work. In the medical center where they provide maternal and general health services their customers are mostly Muslim *Bangalee* as the medical center is located in an area populated mostly by Muslims.

The poly-ethnic character of *Thoi's* workplace, and the lack of ethnic segregation while he is in work at CHC or at his medical center discussing different issues with his colleagues or general people, indicate the existence of shared culture crossing ethnic boundaries. When they discuss conditions at work and providing services to his patients their statuses as colleagues or service provider are more important than their ethnic ones.

A very different type of action-set is that of *Shipon*, who lives very close to *ThoiKhyang* and works as an elected member of the local government ('Union Parishad'). He also owns a small shop which becomes a meeting place for the young people in the evening. He is married but still childless, and has a much different range of linkages than *Thoi*. Apart from his kin and affine, to whom he has certain strong obligations, his action-set includes friends scattered all over the area, as well as colleagues and political associates. He is politically active, and his action-set activates a social field of larger scale than *Thoi*. Because of being a member of local government he is on cordial terms with his non-Christian and non-*Khyang* colleagues and general people of his area. Sometimes, he experiences role-dilemmas I have observed a clash between the area where he lives and the shop owners of the nearest market where he tried to appease both sections of the population as he has stake at both end being a *Khyang* and a member of local government.

Both *Thoi* and *Shipon* identify themselves as *Khyang*, and they also stress that they are simultaneously Christians. Their shared *Khyang* identity includes components such as religion, and a common history of being *Khyang*. The context for any encounter between them is to a great extent defined by a shared historical consciousness, including references to the establishment of the locality. Other dimension of *Shipon's* and *Thoi's* shared identity is, conditional on their integration into greater society.

*OngthaKhyang* is a middle aged man with two wives and six children. He is a plain land cultivator in *Bandarban*. He has got land to produce crops to sustain his big family. Compared to others his action set is limited to the agricultural labor who works with him, the middle man who buys his produce to sell in bigger markets, his neighbor who are mostly Buddhist *Khyang* and Muslim *Bangalee*. During almost all his interaction his *Khyang* identity gets prominence, specially while selling his produce he must depend on the middle man because in the bigger whole sale markets his identity as an ethnic minority constrain him to purse business with the *Bangalee* business men as the syndicate of the whole sale buyers do not want to buy at a fair price and sometimes ethnic minority people have to sell on loss, therefore, they cannot go to the bigger market rather sale their produce to middlemen who are also *Bangalee*. Though in this interaction with middlemen they hold a common understanding it also reinforces his identity of being an ethnic minority, *Khyang*.

*Usha Ching Khyang* is a young male from a village of *Bandarban*. He is a young student of agricultural diploma, mostly lives in *Rangamati* town. When he comes home for vacation or in peak

agriculture season to help his father, he generally feels isolated and out of place in the village where he had born. He states that he cannot mix with anyone in the village, he do not share any understanding with his fellows in the village. He cannot talk or pass time. Rather he enjoys his life in *Rangamati* town. But he regards himself as a *Khyang* wants to practice *Khyang* tradition and speaks his language well. What I assume from *Usha Ching Khyang's* position is that as his understanding and worldview modified because of his studies and living in a cosmopolitan area he feels alienated in the place where is was born and lived early part of his life. He identifies himself as part of a much larger society than the immediacy of his village.

The four persons from two different locations of CHT represent very different positions in terms of education, class and intellectual orientation, but share an identity linked to a tradition. They also have a wide range of shared representations and practices with non-*Khyang*. In terms of the substantial content of *Khyang* tradition of CHT, if we try to regard it as a 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1984) or a complete form of life, it has converged in important respects with practices and representations of other people living at that area and also other parts of the country. In many regard, *Thoi*, *Shipon* and *Usha Ching* seems to have more in common with townsman or other people of the occupational network than with *Ongtha*. Therefore, the segmentary and situational character of social identities should be kept in mind.

### Memory and Identity Formation

The situation of *Khyang* identity between old and new generation, such as the difference in self-identification between *Usha Ching* and *Ongtha* could be explained Halbwachs's idea of collective memory (Halbwachs 2007). For Halbwachs (2007) collective memory is a continuous thought, which is capable of living in the consciousness of groups keeping the memory alive. However, young and old, regardless of age are encompassed within the same perspective as long as certain national, political or religious situations do not realize their full implications. But as soon as a new situation is proposed or imposed, ensuing generations start having different streams of thought. As I have seen, in the both field locations in *Rangamati* and *Bandarban* young generation do not trace back their identity in the past, rather they see themselves as part the complex web of personal relations/ networks, whereas among the older generation, the memory of their past existence still remains as a part of their identity.

From another perspective, the situation of the *Khyang* not only refer to interconnections across boundaries, but transformed consciousness and identities which Ulrich Beck (2002) referred to internal globalization or cosmopolitanization. Different versions of cosmopolitanism is evident as for example in case of *ShiponKhyang* there is a hierarchical loyalty starting from the immediate *Khyang* community, to the entire village comprised of different ethnic groups to the whole ward (lowest administrative unit of Bangladesh) which he represents in the local government. This situation is termed as moral cosmopolitanism by Rorty (1991). There is evidence of presence of cultural cosmopolitanism through intermingling among people, conducts and practices, such as the way they greet people, participation in festivals of other ethnic groups which does not necessarily lead to transformation in values, faiths and commitments (Hansen 2011).

### Identity in Great vis-à-vis Little Tradition

The condition of my research sites are also consistent the relationship between any great and little tradition. As James Scott (1977) shows despite the symbolic opposition opposed interest, the relationship between the two traditions and their respective bearers is not simply a matter of outright conflict or of absolute domination/ subordination. In addition there is a certain amount of collaboration or symbiosis between the two, while the economic, political, and cultural subordination of the bearers of little tradition is a negotiated subordination.

Historically the village of *Bandarban* has constituted something more than merely a physical aggregation of households. Ritually, it has been set apart by local guardian spirits and religious shrines; economically, it has represented a self-sufficient community; socially, it has formed the unit of status, of reciprocity, and of social insurance; politically, it has generally been a unit of dispute settlement as well as of administration and taxation, until the massive economic changes of the since 1980s which undermined much of the economic basis of village autonomy. On the contrary, the village was set off in *Rangamati* as the *Khyang* stopped cultivation and engaged themselves with non-agricultural activities, the village had no traditional political structures, further, as most of the *Khyang* converted to Christianity, their religious beliefs and ritual were also transformed so it was apparent negotiation rather a complete adoption of new traditions. However, few of the bases of *Khyang* identity, most importantly language persisted and which they are still practicing, however, in competition with the *Bangla* language which they must use in everyday activities is gaining more use with time.

## Conclusion

If we take the holistic purview of *Khyang* into consideration it is comprehensible that the loss of language varies and it is more prominent in *Rangamati* than *Bandarban*, and I assume as the area is more connected with other *Bangla* speaking people through being part of a multi-ethnic social milieu; the occupation based differentiation between *Kongtu* and *LaituKhyang* is no longer functioning; intermarriages between different groups of people with different background is more common- in other words, that their culture, if not their tradition, has adapted to the demands of interconnection between different groups of people and economic activities. So what I see there is not such fixed identity markers and which they maintain to preserve their identity rather a set of factors are in play initiating situational identities, thus, their boundary maintenance is a dynamic process (Barth 1969). Stereotypes and groupings depend on perceived relationships among different ethnic groups; how they relate to those people at the moment they categorize them (Berreby 2005). The condition of the *Khyang* shows how stereotypes or categories have changed over the years and identities are produced and reproduced.

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