

ECONOMY AND IDENTITY: THE ORAONS' PERSPECTIVE IN NORTHWEST BANGLADESH

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Abstract

This paper explains the relationship between economy and identity among the Oraons in Barind region of Northwest Bangladesh. Focusing on original in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in Barind, the paper concerns Oraons' identity that how it is structured by their present economic condition as well as by the processes that have promoted internal Oraon diversity. Despite this concern, the paper depicts the processes of Oraons' identity formation as minority group or *adibashis* or indigenous people. The Oraons, by claiming their identity rights as *adibashis*, strategically unite with other *adibashi* group from both Bangladesh and abroad, politically respond to global indigeneity. Theoretically, the paper thus contributes to the literature on ethnic studies explaining the relationship between economy and identity in the case of the Oraons.

Keywords: Oraons, economy, identity, indigeneity, Bangladesh

Introduction

This paper aims to examine the relationship between economy and identity among the Oraons in Barind region of Northwest Bangladesh. The Oraons are an ethnic minority group, who mostly live in Northwest Bangladesh. Although the Bengali Muslim identity predominates in Bangladesh, the country includes the non-Muslims and non-Bengali identities. They are Santal, Oraon, Koch, Malo and many others in the north-west; Garo in central Bangladesh; Khashi and Hajog in the north-east; and Rakhain in the south and south-eastern regions. These people are considered ethnic minorities in relation to the dominant ethnic identity, Bengali Muslim majority (see Schendel, 2009: 31-32).

As observed, the Bengali Muslim majority dominates the non-Muslim minorities including the Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and *adibashis* in the socio-economic

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sphere of Barind region. The *adibashis*' deteriorating economic condition impacts many aspects of their socio-cultural life. Many have converted from their original traditions to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam. Emphasising on this understanding about the *adibashis*, this paper aims to depict the relationship between economy and identity in the case of the Oraons. In this regard, the paper hypothesises a change in economic activity can potentially change the Oraons' identity – a latter interpretation.

Research Questions and Objectives

Specifically, the paper addresses the following research questions and objectives in relation to the hypothesis stated above. Firstly, what are the features and the attributes of Oraon history and culture through which they define themselves as a distinct group of people or a community in Barind? Secondly, what processes help explain the Oraons' present economic condition? Thirdly, how have these economic circumstances influenced Oraon socio-cultural life and their identity? Have differentiation and polarisation occurred among the Oraons and, if so, is this structured by their economic condition? In other words, what are the factors or the processes that project the Oraons' identity as 'Oraon'? The paper also provides a discussion on how the Oraons respond to the discourse of indigeneity in Bangladesh claiming their identity rights and recognition as *adibashis*. Finally, the paper provides an argument explaining the relationship between Oraons' economy and their identity.

Key Concepts

The paper conceptualises the terms including 'ethnic community,' 'ethnic group,' 'ethnic minority,' 'indigenous people' or '*adibashi*' interchangeably in relation to the understanding of the relationship between economy and identity of the Oraons. Generally speaking, an ethnic community is a group of people who interact with other groups of people for their economic pursuits but still attempt to maintain relative homogeneity as a socio-cultural unit. Some ethnic communities are subjects of the ruling or dominant groups and are dispossessed or disadvantaged or suppressed. They are in both conflict and cooperation with other groups of people and seek recognition as distinct groups of people who aim at equal opportunity of participation in mainstream society. This discussion helps to understand ethnic community as both the majority and minority in a society, that is, both the Bengali majority and the Oraon minority are ethnic communities in Bangladesh (see Islam, 2014: 28; 30-31; 2016: 128-129; 2017d: 225).

As stated above, the Bengali Muslim majority dominates the Oraon minorities in every sphere of their life. Nonetheless, the latter largely depends on the former for managing livelihood and subsistence. This understanding concerns that the economy of a group of people corresponds to their everyday practices both contextually and historically. Also, the economy of a group of people is informed by their cultural values, social and ceremonial obligations as well as their interactions and interrelations with other groups of people and the social problems that they face historically as well as in the present. Economic practices of a group of people also include their wage labour for other groups of people, or the trade of their physical labour in exchange for receiving either food or money to buy food. Managing their economic practices also relates to the cliental relationships they form with patrons from the dominant groups. This discussion helps to conceptualise 'economy' (see Islam, 2014: 28; 30-31; 2016: 128; 2017d: 225) that how the Oraons perform their community festivals and ceremonies help define their identity.

Generally, identity refers to the way people define themselves and others in terms of various categories, to differentiate between themselves and 'others' (Turner et al., 1987). However, ethnic identity is marked by the cultural features of a group of people. These features are considered as the outward symbols through which they maintain their proprietary identity basing on primordial view. Also, ethnic identity must be defined basing on concurrent circumstances – the instrumental or circumstantial view (Otto & Driessen 2000, cited in Islam, 2018a: 74). The primordial approach understands ethnic identity as a deeply rooted and unchangeable phenomenon of people (Van den Berghe, 1978). In contrast, the circumstantial or instrumental view explains the notion of ethnic sentiment as constructed and reproduced through fundamentally politically processes in a particular socio-economic context (Jayawardena, 1980). Also, the synthesis of both primordial and circumstantial perspectives works as a 'mediating reference point' (Seol, 2008: 351) depicting identity formation of an ethnic group, which helps to understand the processes of Oraons' identity formation as 'Oraon' (Islam, 2018a).

Literature Review

The relationship between economy and identity reviewing comparative literatures on ethnic studies concerns a change in economic activity has the potential to change people's ethnic identity. Broadly speaking, anthropologists interest in the study of economic activity and ethnic identity in many parts of the world (Eriksen, 2005: 355-357). Regarding the classical literature on this topic, Barth (1956) focuses on the mutual dependence of ethnic groups, explaining the interdependent economic

activities of Pathans, Kohistanis and Gujars, who occupy different 'ecological niches' in Swat of North Pakistan. Of these three ethnic groups, the dominant group, the Pathans, are cereal farmers who are constrained by geographical boundaries and climatic conditions so that they cannot produce two annual crops. The Kohistanis adapt a dual economic activity engaging in less-intensive agriculture and livestock, while the third group, the Gujars, are livestock herders who also produce some grain (maize, wheat or millet), and exchange goods and services to the dominant groups – Pathans and Kohistanis – in varying degrees. Thus, although mutual economic dependence is found among these three ethnic groups, ecological and political factors have become the basis of their ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1956: 1079-1089).

Barth (1969a) also shows that political competition between Baluchs and Pathans makes it advantageous for Pathans to redefine themselves as Baluchs, suggesting that there is no direct link between economic activity and ethnic membership. But the economic changes or activities among the Pathans facilitate their political competition with the Baluchs so that the Pathans redefine themselves as Baluchs. However, in contrast to Barth (1956, 1969a), Haaland (1969), in his contribution to Barth (1969b), states that a change in livelihood can entail a change in ethnic identity. Haaland's material from Western Sudan depicts the Fur people who, due to varying circumstances, switch from agriculture to livestock herding, effectively becoming Baggara. The Fur people redefine themselves as Baggara and change their ethnic identity by pursuing economic advantages – nomadic subsistence based on animal husbandry – that generates an attitude towards saving and investment. Although the nomadized Fur people (Baggara) also adopt Baggara social prescription or culture that they practise in changing circumstances through hospitality and marriages with members of Baggara community, it is their rights in and ownership of productive resources (cattle) helps them to claim or redefine as Baggara. Thus, a change in economic activity is accompanied by a change in ethnic identity.

Despite this, a close link or relationship between a dominant economic and political situation and an elite ethnic identity is observed in other relevant ethnic studies. For example, the Creoles of Sierra Leone in the 1960s, as described by Cohen (cited in Eriksen, 2005: 356) are a small group of economically and politically dominant people who distinguish themselves from two large ethnic groups, Temne and Mende. In spite of their privileged social position, they did not have any legitimate official status as they were not recognised as a dominant ethnic group by the government. So, the Creoles found a way of reproducing their elite status through forming an informal organisation. In general, ethnic elites find ways to

retain privileges in a society, tending to reproduce their social position or identity (Eriksen, 2005: 356).

As Eriksen (2005: 356) argues, how Creoles retained their privileges is applicable in the case of the other ethnic groups. For example, in Mauritius, the numerically weak Sino-Mauritians (Mauritians of Chinese descent) are economically powerful yet have limited social interaction with Mauritians. A similar situation can be found in other colonial plantation societies. The groups, who are politically and economically dominant, form elite ethnic identities (Eriksen, 2005). The plantation workers on Mauritius are of Indian origin, the workers in the sugar factory are Creoles (African origin), the middle managerial level are of 'coloured' mixed African – European or Indian (usually upper caste) origin, and the top managerial level are European (Eriksen, 2005: 356-357). How elite ethnic identities are formed has also been discussed in the case of the Dutch Burghers of Sri Lanka (Henry, 2008). The Dutch Burghers, occupying a bureaucratic social position as well as forming the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon, retained privileges and defined themselves as an elite ethnic group during the British colonial administration (Henry, 2008: 214-215).

The link between political and economic functions and the formation of new ethnic identities has also been depicted in case of the Shan and Kachin of North-East Burma (present Myanmar) by Leach (1964) in his classic study *Political Systems of Highland Burma*. The Shan are a feudal hierarchy or autocracy and the Kachin move between two 'ideal social models,' *gumlao* and *gumsa*. *Gumlao* society is anarchistic and egalitarian or democratic by nature, while *gumsa* society is a compromise between egalitarian and hierarchical ideals. The Kachin become *gumsa* by assuming the names and titles of the Shan and claim aristocracy, while still appealing to the ideals of *gumlao* equality to avoid the feudal prescription of paying dues or taxes to their traditional chief. Some of the *gumsa* communities want to become Shan, while in an opposite direction, the rest of the *gumsa* communities want to become *gumlao* (Leach, 1964: 8-9). Thus, both political choices and economic circumstances are implicated in the formation of new ethnic identities.

Basing on this comparative discussion, this paper attempts to interpret the processes of Oraons' identity formation and whether they redefine or change their ethnic identity or retain their identity as 'Oraon' in a changing economic condition in Barind – a latter discussion. Also, before analysing the relationship between economy and identity in the case of the Oraons, this endeavour briefly provides the methodology of the paper below.

Methodology

The methodology² of the paper is based primarily on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Barind, supplemented by an investigation of the literature and historical sources on the Oraons. The fieldwork covers the duration from October 2011 to September 2012 among the Oraons. A revisit of fieldwork also covers from March to September 2013 to recheck the field data and information. Thus, the total duration of fieldwork is 18 months. Theselected villages are Bilpara of Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district, Doihara of Gobindaganj sub-district of Gaibandha district, Udaypur, Binodpur and Ramwesarpara villages of Mithapukur sub-district of Rangpur district. As observed, the Oraons live in clusters of the villages in Barind. Thus, the study area includes 11 Oraon clusters in five villages, which constitute 260 Oraon households. The study population (260) are thus the calculated heads of all Oraon households consisting of 230 males and thirty females. Ethnographic interviews for data collection focus on all these Oraon household heads.

As well as individual interviews, the data collection process involves focus group interviews³ and participant observation of community events, allowing for qualitative description of Oraon socio-cultural life. The data collection process also employs techniques including rapport building, participation and observation, survey, ethnographic interviews, collection of genealogies, visual methods using video and photography. Key informant⁴ interviews, case studies and informal discussions are also the essential tools of collecting data from the Oraons. The data analysis process introduces the collected qualitative primary data with comparative secondary sources in explaining the relationship between economy and identity in the case of the Oraons.

² The methodology of the paper corresponds to that of my study among the Oraons (Islam, 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; 2017d; 2018a; 2018b and 2020). I introduce my cases and research participants using pseudonyms. I do not introduce my research participants (except if given consent). I also do not use the Bengali Muslims' proper names in the study.

³ I conducted 11 focus group discussions (FGDs) among Oraons choosing seven to nine research participants from each of the Oraon clusters.

⁴ I had 10 key research participants including the Oraon *pradhans* (headman) – Badal Minji, Ramesh Tiggya, Ram Tiggya, Lalito Kujur and Ramchandra Minji from Bilpara, Doihara, Udaypur, Binodpur and Ramwesarpara villages respectively. Interviews with these Oraon *pradhans* enabled me to identify the remaining five key research participants from different places (who were Oraons and were not included among research participants from study villages). They are Arun Khalko, Lucas Kispotta, Clement Tirkey, Uzzal Ekka, and Victor Lakhra – provide historical facts and information about the Oraons.

The Oraons

This section of the paper provides a short cultural profile of the Oraons⁵ that helps to define themselves as a distinct community in Bangladesh. The Oraons belong to the 'Dravidian linguistic group' (Roy, 2004: 18, Tirkey, 1989: 5) and speak 'kurukh and sadri' language (see Islam, 2014: 85-86). They also speak Bengali (Jalil, 2001: 44, cited in Islam, 2018b: 6). As observed, the Oraons execute socio-economic activities following the directions of a *pradhan* (headman) of *padda panch* (Oraons' traditional political organisation) in villages. They are a patriarchal society, and an Oraon male usually heads their family. The Oraons practise clan-exogamous, but the community is endogamous. The Oraons are animists and believe in *dharmes* (Oraons' Sun-God) (Tirkey, 1980: 26). Oraons' festivals are associated with their agricultural practices yearly. The festivals are *fagua* (New Year celebration), *sarhul* (nature worship), *karam* (enemy protection) and *sohorae* (cattle festival) (Islam, 2014: 149, 184-187).

The Oraons have migrated from India and settled in Barind during the British Colonial Government (1765-1947) (Barakat *et al.*, 2009; Bleie, 1987; Islam, 2014; 2016; 2018b). They along with other communities settle as forest-food-dwellers, and practise agriculture in Barind. At present, most of the Oraons are landless agricultural day-labourers and are less than self-sufficient in livelihood. Despite this situation, they are not properly addressed in the development process (see Islam, 2014; 2016: 128). The Constitution of Bangladesh does not also recognise their distinct languages, religions, cultures and identities (Drong, 2004; see Islam, 2017a: 27). This discussion on Oraons' socio-cultural features helps to define themselves a distinct community, and also sheds light on their changing economy and identity.

Oraons' Economy

Before British colonisation in 1765 in India, the Oraons were self-sufficient in livelihood practising agriculture. The British India Government took them away from India and settled them in Bangladesh (Roy, 2004; Tirkey, 1980; 1989; 1999; Koonathan, 1999; Das & Raha, 1963; cited in Islam: 2014). Over time, socio-political factors have caused economic deterioration among Oraons (Islam, 2016: 130-132; 2017d: 226-227). In this regard, the following case study of Oraon

⁵ The Oraons' profile corresponds to that of my study among them (Islam, 2014; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; 2017d; 2018a; 2018b and 2020) essentially draws Oraons' socio-cultural background.

land loss during the partition of Bengal in 1947 provides an understanding of the situation.

Sokhindra Beck, aged 30 years old, lives in Ramwesarpara village of Rangpur district. He states that his grandfather had about three hundred decimals agricultural land. During the partition of Bengal in 1947, his grandfather along with all family members went to Paschim Banga in India, leaving all their land and property. When the conflict between the Hindus and Muslims ceased, they came back but found the Bengali Muslims had illegally occupied all of their land and property except for their homestead land and houses.

What they did: they accepted this land grabbing by the Bengali Muslims. They did not get back any portion of their land because of the Bengali Muslims' favourable or majority position in the locality. They avoided submitting to the local court a land grabbing case. They remained silent because they are minorities. They had no choice but to accept this suppression by local influential Bengali Muslims.

Sokhindra states: 'We the *adibashi* Oraon *khatriyas* do not like any conflict. We like peace. We asked the Bengali Muslims to help us, but they did not help us. They asked us to show our land documents. We did not have any documents, and the Bengalis are still occupying our land. Previously, the entire territory – all the land surrounding our homestead – was ours, but today we do not have land to cultivate.'

Continuing this discussion, Oraon land loss following the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951 is depicted by Mongoli Lakhra, aged 70 years old, an Oraon widow, who lives in Dhappara of Mithapukur in Rangpur district.

Mongoli Lakhra notes that her father-in-law had many lands in the past. After the abolition of the *zamindari* system in 1951, the local influential Bengali Muslim peasants grabbed her father-in-law's five hundred decimals of cultivable land, when she was a newly married bride at her in-law's house. This land grabbing incident is known to everyone in the locality, but no one has helped them to reoccupy her father-in-law's land. She adds that there have been many incidents of land grabbing in the locality and that the Bengali Muslim peasants are still cultivating the Oraon land.

This discussion also documents that increased Oraon land loss that happened during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971, depicted by Keshori Minji, aged 46 years old, who lives in Binodpur of Mithapukur sub-district in Rangpur.

Keshori Minji notes that his father had 250 decimals agricultural land. During the independence war of Bangladesh in 1971, a local influential Bengali Muslim forcibly occupied all their land. When they tried to claim their land, this man threatened them with death. They could do nothing to reoccupy their land.

During these socio-political events stated above, the Oraons confront with changing social relationships with different actors including the colonialist, local intermediaries, landlords, money-lenders or rich Bengali Muslim peasants. Theoretically speaking, the 'changing social relationships' (Malinowski, 1922; Firth, 1929; Gluckman, 1955; Polanyi, 1957; Mauss, 1990; cited in Islam, 2014; 2016: 133) of the Oraons help define their economy. Oraons' social relationships, which are constituted on their 'long-neglected issues of [...] local history' (Roseberry, 1989), also help define their economic condition. The 'regional settings and local history' (Ortner, 1984) of the Oraons, which helps depict their 'social position' (Wolf, 1982) in Bangladesh, also help define Oraons' economic condition. Again, arguing that the 'economic exploitation' (Scott, 1976) that Oraons face in course of history helps to explain their economic condition.

The following case study of Buddha Lakhra corresponds to the livelihood strategies of almost all of the Oraons.

Buddha Lakhra, aged 40 years old, lives in Binodpur village of Rangpur District. He engages in agricultural day-labouring to earn subsistence for his family of three. But he can hardly work three months during the two agricultural seasons a year. The remaining nine months a year he remains jobless. During the agricultural season, he can earn barely BDT 6,000 a month, i.e. BDT 18,000 a year. But he faces crisis to manage his family subsistence. Thus, he survives by searching i.e. gleaning for food grains including potatoes, eggplants and paddy that are left after cultivation in the fields of the local Bengali Muslim peasants. He also does fish in the nearby ponds, canals and rivers. He also hunts tortoises, rabbits and rats in the neighbouring jungles. Besides this, he sometimes goes to the neighbouring villages, towns or city centres to find a job. By all these means, Buddha Lakhra tries to manage his subsistence; but he faces hardship.

This discussion helps to state that the Oraons face economic crisis and lead a hard life in Barind. At present, almost all of them are landless agricultural day-labourers and less than self-sufficient in livelihood. Also, although Oraons are landless and face hardship in life, they practise a form of ‘inter-household networks of reciprocity [of resources]’ (Smith, 2002: 247) or ‘investing resources in social relationships outside the family [or] sharing with kin’ (Peterson & Taylor, 2003: 106) in performing their festivals and ceremonies. Oraons’ inter-household economic practices contribute to understanding of their ‘domestic moral economy’ (Islam, 2014; 2016: 136) through which they perform their community activities.

Nonetheless, Oraons borrow to manage subsistence because of their dire economic situation. Also, Oraons cannot repay their current loan. Because of their concurrent economic demand, they borrow again in exchange of the advance sale of their physical labour at a lower price to the local rich Bengali Muslims and money-lenders, which puts them in a permanent process of debt. This situation of ‘indebtedness’ is ‘burdensome’ (Lowrey, 2006; cited in Islam, 2017d: 229) for Oraons. Oraons’ indebtedness places them into risk of starvation that they develop a ‘cliental relationship’ (Scott, 1976: 9; cited in Islam, 2014; 2016: 137) with local Bengali Muslims or money-lenders as their survival strategy.

Oraons’ strategic relations with local rich Bengali Muslim peasants places them in a situation of strategic indebtedness. Oraons’ strategic indebtedness helps to interpret their ‘actions in an apprehensible moral universe of consequentiality’ (Acciaoli, 2004: 179; cited in Islam, 2016: 137) through which they manage their everyday moral subsistence and socio-cultural practice. Although the Oraons place themselves in a position of strategic indebtedness, they wish to be free of debt. Also, they cannot repay credit, and remain debtors. Thus, credit can best be termed as ‘fictitious capital’ (Marx, 1894: 595; cited in Islam, 2016: 137) for Oraons. While debt places them in a position of dependency or in a destructive position, practising strategic indebtedness can ensure their livelihood management.

Oraons’ strategic indebtedness also constitutes a functional framework that allows the Oraons to establish ‘personal relationships [and] frames of reference’ (L’Estoile, 2014: 62; cited in Islam, 2016: 138) with the Bengali Muslim peasants. Oraons’ strategic indebtedness as a survival strategy, thus, potentially offers them a long-term capacity to ensure subsistence, while the dominant Bengali Muslim peasants maximise profits exploiting Oraons’ physical labour at a cheaper rate.

Because of this economic exploitation, Oraons rely on ‘religious [conversion] or

opponent structures of protection and assistance' (Scott, 1976: 204; cited in Islam, 2017b: 62; 2017d: 230) to survive against local Bengali Muslim peasants' domination. This discussion sheds light on the processes through which Oraons have been differentiated based on religious conversion.

Oraons' Religious Identifications

As observed, the Oraons have turned to religious conversion and opportunist structures of protection and assistance as survival strategies. Because of their economic crisis, they seek economic, legal and educational support from the development agencies including Christian Missionaries, Buddhist Monasteries or non-governmental organisations in Barind. The Oraons embrace religious conversion to either Christianity or Buddhism. Some Oraons have converted to Hinduism as they have a different perception about their history as Oraon *Khatriyas*, and also because of socio-economic exploitation by the Bengali Muslims. Some Oraons also seek economic help from local Bengali Muslims and convert themselves as Muslim Oraons through conversion to Islam, but are exploited (see Islam, 2014).

As revealed, the Oraon groups are Christian Oraons, Hindu Oraons or Oraon *Khatriyas*, Buddhist Oraons and Muslim Oraons. Also, some Oraons who have not been converted to any world religion and who practise their age-old beliefs and traditions. They introduce themselves as Sarna Oraons. The majority, 94 (36.15 per cent) of the Oraon households, are Oraon *khatriyas* (members of the second Varna, according to the Hindu caste system), followed by 92 (35.39 per cent) Christian Oraons, 67 (25.77 per cent) traditional Sarna Oraons and 7 (2.69 per cent) Buddhist Oraons (Islam, 2014). I did not find any Muslim Oraon households, but a process of Islamisation has been identified based on the comments of research participants. Lalito Kujur, aged 55 years old, who lives in Binodpur village of Rangpur district, states that;

Because of our economic problems, we have been converted to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Also, very few Oraons belong to our original belief and tradition. Still, we – the Oraons – organise in our *padma panch*, although our social structure is now weakened.

Basing on this discussion, this paper argues that Oraons' religious identifications are 'socially constructed and [are] fluid entity' (Williams, 2015: 149) considering their changing socio-economic condition. Oraons' religious identifications are not

the ‘mutually exclusive categories’ (Gottschalk, 2001: 183) nor do provide the foundation of Oraon society (Islam, 2014; 2017c: 296). Although Oraons change ‘their own individual or group [identity]’ (Seol, 2008: 341) because of their changing economic condition and of the impact of different world religions, they nevertheless assert their identity as ‘Oraon’.

Oraons’ Identity

As discussed above, although the Oraons have changed some of their socio-cultural practices, they are still identifiable by their language, clans, traditions and particular cultural practices. Oraons’ practices of these socio-cultural features give them a sense of ‘authority, legitimacy and rightness’ (Nash, 1996: 28) to their identity. Arguing that Oraons’ socio-cultural practices do not only explain their identity as Oraon in ‘primordial ties’ (Geertz, 1963: 109), but also provide ‘a form of strategic essentialism’ (Seol, 2008: 344) in representing their minority identity in dealings with the Bengali Muslim majority (see Islam, 2018a: 74).

Yet, Oraons’ interactions and confrontations with local Bengali Muslims play a crucial role in constituting their identity. The Oraons face many threats from the Bengali Muslims, as demonstrated by Abedon Minji, aged 32 years old, who lives in Paschim Doihara of Gobindaganj sub-district of Gaibandha district (Islam, 2014: 196; 2018a: 81-82).

About 15 years back in 1997, I was in economic crisis, so I wanted to sell one of my bullocks. Hearing my decision to sell my bullock, the local Bengali Muslim (1) asked me to give him the bullock, saying that he would pay me the cost of my bullock later on. I refused his proposal and asked him to pay me the cost of my bullock cash in hand, as I am in crisis. However, another local Bengali Muslim (2) wanted to buy my bullock in cash. I agreed with the latter Bengali Muslim (2) to hand over my bullock to him.

But in the meantime, the former Bengali Muslim (1) the following day just took my bullock away from my house. He slaughtered my bullock and enjoyed the meat of it with the neighbouring Bengali Muslim peasants (3). Later on, we asked for a meeting in our locality to solve this bullock abduction. The former Bengali Muslim (1) was asked to hand over the total cost – BDT 10,000 – of my bullock to another Bengali Muslim peasant (4). But later on, the former Bengali Muslim (1) threatened me, and he did not give any money to another Bengali Muslim peasant (4) to pay me for my lost bullock.

As observed, sometimes, local Bengali Muslim youths also disturb the Oraons in their dwellings. In response, the Oraons protest and sometimes even beat the Bengalis, depicted by Momot Kha Kha, aged 53 years old, who lives in Udaypur village of Rangpur district (Islam, 2014: 201, 2018a: 83).

The local Bengali Muslims usually come and ask us to prepare *haria* for drinking. Sometimes, they also attempt to abuse our female members. They also threaten to beat us if we do not work according to their will. In such a case, some local Bengali Muslim youths came to my house and asked my wife to prepare *haria* and cook food for them. All this was made for them, as we treat them as our neighbours. But subsequently, they attempted to talk to my wife, after becoming tipsy from drinking *haria*. I noticed it and I beat the three guys; me alone. Later on, nothing happened because the guys came to my house with a bad intention to abuse us.

The above discussion portrays that Oraon interactions or relationships with local Bengali Muslims result in economic loss for Oraons, which in part, explains their identity as a minority group. Oraons' socio-economic condition also forms their 'ethnic group sentiment' (Jayawardena, 1980: 447), which sometimes leads them to protest against local Bengalis. The Oraons contest with local Bengalis, that is, their 'protest is produced' (Henry, 1998; 2008) because of local Bengalis' domination. This antagonistic relationship of Oraons with local Bengalis has led to a process of Oraonisation, which helps to understand the 'mediating reference point' (Seol, 2008: 351; cited in Islam, 2018a: 83) between the primordial and circumstantial viewpoint. The primordial and circumstantial factors elucidate the process of Oraonisation – Oraons' identity formation in Barind.

Oraons' identity formation is also constructed by their claiming rights as *adibashis* (Indigenous people) through their connection with other ethnic groups from both Bangladesh and abroad, politically responds to 'indigeneity' (Islam, 2017a). Generally, indigenous people contrast developing confrontations within nation-states by establishing international networks (Soucaille, 2011: 205). This association of indigenous people particularly with that of global indigeneity is often challenged by the national governments treating indigenous people as an extremely sensitive issue (Marschke et al., 2008: 483, cited in Islam, 2017a: 32).

The Government of Bangladesh does not recognise the due rights and recognition of Oraons (along with other ethnic communities) as *adibashis* and has banned celebration of the International Day (the 9th August) of the World's indigenous

people (Islam, 2014; 2017a). Also, the Oraons maintain deep socio-political engagement seeking help from the international community and forming their strategic networks with different *adibashi* groups from both Bangladesh and abroad for their identity as *adibashis* to escape from local Bengali domination and state oppression. Oraons' marginalisation conforms an understanding of 'indigeneity-as-marginalisation' (Marschke, *et al.*, 2008: 488; cited in Islam, 2017a: 47). The Oraons demand for socio-economic change and equal participation in mainstream Bangladeshi society and culture, which provides an understanding of 'indigeneity-as-resistance' (Marschke, *et al.*, 2008: 488, cited in Islam, 2017a: 47). This discussion, thus, concerns that Oraon ethnic group claims rights and recognition as *adibashis* as an identity category in Bangladesh.

Discussion

This paper states that the Oraons had a prosperous life and were self-sufficient in livelihood in the past. At present, they face economic crisis and lead a hard life in Barind. Almost all of them are landless agricultural day-labourers and less than self-sufficient in livelihood (Islam, 2014). Also, although Oraons are landless and face hardship in life, Oraons' 'inter-household economic practices' contribute to understanding of their 'domestic moral economy' (Islam, 2014; 2016: 136) through which they perform their community activities. In addition to Oraons' domestic moral economy, borrowing loans or credit or practising debt is another form of Oraons' economic practice.

Also, Oraons cannot repay their current loan. Because of their concurrent economic demand, they borrow again in exchange of the advance sale of their physical labour at a lower price to the local rich Bengali Muslims and money-lenders, which puts them in a permanent process of debt. Although Oraons' indebtedness places them into risk of starvation, they are forced to develop a 'cliental relationship' (Scott, 1976: 9; cited in Islam, 2014; 2016: 137) with local Bengali Muslims or money-lenders as their survival strategy. Oraons' strategic relations with local Bengali Muslims for avoiding risk of starvation put them in a situation of 'strategic indebtedness' (Islam, 2014, 2016). Oraons' strategic indebtedness as a survival strategy potentially offers them a long-term capacity to ensure subsistence, while the Bengali Muslims maximise profits exploiting Oraons' physical labour at a cheaper rate. Because of this economic exploitation, Oraons have been differentiated into groups basing on their conversion to Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam.

Although the Oraons change their own individual or group identity because of their changing economic condition and of the impact of different world religions, they nevertheless assert their identity as 'Oraon'. The Oraons represent themselves, and are also represented by others, in 'primordial ties' (Geertz, 1963: 109), basing on particular socio-cultural features. Yet, Oraon identity is circumstantially created. Oraons' interactions, relationships and conforntations with local Bengali Muslims play a crucial role in constituting their identity (Islam, 2014). The Oraons are constituted as a minority group through socio-economic exploitation by the Bengali Muslims. The primordial and circumstantial factors combining as the 'mediating reference point' (Seol, 2008: 351; cited in Islam, 2018a: 83) elucidate the process of Oraonisation – Oraons' identity formation. Oraons' identity formation is also constructed by their claiming rights as *adibashis* through their connection with other ethnic groups from both Bangladesh and abroad, politically responds to 'indigeneity' (Islam, 2017a). This discussion concerns that Oraon ethnic group claims rights and recognition as *adibashis* as an identity category in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

This paper argues that Oraons' changing economic condition or their dependency on Bengali Muslims is not one of 'mutual dependence or interdependent economic activities' in the same way that 'the Pathans, Kohistanis and Gujars of Swat of North Pakistan' (Barth, 1956) – who engage with one another economically but maintain separate identities. Although Oraons face economic exploitation, they do not change identity like 'the Pathans' – who embracing (with an opposite direction to the Oraons) a better economic condition politically redefine themselves as 'the Baluchs' (Barth, 1969a). Again, although Oraons adopt religious identifications embracing a changing economic condition and different world religious views, they do not convert themselves to other identity like 'the Fur people of Western Sudan' – who switch from agriculture to livestock herding and become 'the Baggara' (Haaland, 1969).

Referring to the changing conditions of 'the Creoles of Sierra Leone' (Cohen, 1981), 'the Sino-Mauritians of Mauritius (Eriksen, 1998; 2005), or 'the Dutch Burghers of Sri Lanka' (Henry, 2008) – who gain elite ethnic status or identity through their strategic formation of informal organisations; this paper also argues that although the Oraons maintain strategic connection with all *adibashi* groups from both Bangladesh and abroad, they do not find recognition claiming identity as *adibashis* from the Government of Bangladesh. Again, referring to as Leach (1964) depicts, the Kachin of North-East Burma – who form new identities intermediating

between Shan and *gumlao*, the paper also argues that although Oraons re-unite politically intermediating between all *adibashis* from both Bangladesh and abroad for their economic and political purposes, they neither find recognition as *adibashis* as a new identity category nor their equal participation in the mainstream Bangladeshi society.

Theoretically, this paper draws out the key argument that although the comparative literature reveals that a change in economic activity can transform ethnic identity as exemplified in the works of Barth (1956 and 1969a), Haaland (1969), Cohen (1981), Eriksen (1998 and 2005), Henry (2008) and Leach (1964); the Oraons, in spite of dramatic changes in their economic circumstances over time, remain proudly Oraon. Oraons' insights provide an understanding about the perspective of people's identity construction and their choices and interests in shaping their livelihood and survival strategies. Significantly, this paper thus provides a theoretical contribution to the literature on ethnic studies in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the world by explaining the relationship between economy and identity in the case of the Oraons.

Notes

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