

# UNDERSTANDING STATE POLICY AND THE ROLE OF BANGLADESH NATIONAL MUSEUM IN PRESERVING ETHNIC CULTURE IN BANGLADESH.

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## Abstract

This article aims to understand the state policies and the specific role played by the Bangladesh National Museum in preserving and safeguarding ethnic cultures in Bangladesh. Three specific objectives were pursued: the description of the provisions outlined in different laws, acts, and policies that are designed to safeguard ethnic cultures, the examination of the diverse ethnic objects' collections stored in the museum; and the analysis of the role played by the museum in the collection, exhibition, and preservation of objects pertaining to ethnic groups. The anthropological understanding has been used to comprehend ethnic minorities, policy, and the role of the museum. In-depth interviews, KII, and policy document analysis have been used to collect data. The study argues that state policies mostly prioritize infrastructure development programmes, mainstreaming efforts, and the assimilation of ethnic communities rather than establishing specific and contextually appropriate strategies and actions for the preservation of ethnic traditions and customs. Similar to state policy, the museum has collected artefacts from 14 ethnic groups of the country. Most of the collected objects are from Tripura, Garo Chakma, and Santals groups, with six categories of cultural aspects, e.g., ornament, textile, musical instrument, arms, armour and metal. The museum's identification of some artefacts belonging to ethnic groups is hindered by the improper collecting procedure. Only 2.7% of total artefacts are ethnic objects, which is insufficient to represent all ethnic cultures. The state policy lacks specificity for preserving ethnic cultures, leading to distorted practices by the museum in dealing with ethnic groups, compromising objectivity and universality in museum practices due to inherent politics in policy-making.

**Keywords:** State policies, Museum, Ethnic cultures, Colonial legacy

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## Introduction

Bangladesh is a multicultural nation, characterized by its diverse ethnic groups, each with unique cultural characteristics, alongside the mainstream Bengali population. According to the gazette published in 2019, a total of fifty small ethnic groups were included (MOCA, 2019). The country has a combined population of 16,50,159 ethnic people across the land (BBS, 2023). Ethnic groups across the globe confront continual obstacles in protecting their rights, customs, and knowledge while navigating a society dominated by a Western worldview and living in tension with the non-ethnic world (Magni, 2016).

Furthermore, the government of Bangladesh is implementing the SDGs using a 'whole of society' approach, working with a variety of stakeholders to raise awareness and commitment (GED, 2020). Ethnic minority groups are among the many marginalized and socioeconomically 'fallen behind' populations in the country (GED, 2020). The attainment of the SDGs has been highlighted by focusing equally on three dimensions, such as economic, social, and environmental issues (UNESCO 2015). While the 17 SDGs do not explicitly prioritize culture, they do include objectives such as 4.7, which aims to ensure that all individuals have the knowledge and competencies required for sustainable development, such as education, human rights, gender equality, peace, non-violence, global citizenship, and cultural diversity, all of which are essential components of human and sustainable development (UCLG, 2018). The present trajectory of development towards the SDGs has shown that the preservation of ethnic cultures, such as livelihood, knowledge, history, language, customs, kinship, myth, belief system, and rituals, is very important.

The Dacca Museum was established on March 5, 1913. The Bangladesh National Museum (hereinafter BNM) was established on November 17, 1983, and has since been recognized as one of the largest museums in South Asia dedicated to preserving culture and history. The Department of Ethnography and Decorative Art at BNM is dedicated to the acquisition, conservation, exhibition, and scholarly study of various aspects of Bangladeshi culture, such as individuals' entitlements, festivities, practices, inheritance, and livelihoods, both material and immaterial. This department is dedicated to the acquisition and exhibition of various artefacts pertaining to the traditions, rites, rituals, and festivals observed by several ethnic communities.

Moreover, the BNM collects, preserves, displays and conduct research on ethnological objects of different ethnic groups in Bangladesh. The museum inventories and publishes all gathered ethnological items. This institution is responsible for arranging seminars, special exhibitions and fairs on ethnic

cultures and objects (Bangladesh Gazette, 2022). The BNM conducts these activities with a view to preserving the cultural heritage and diversity of Bangladesh (BNM, 2022). And over the years, a variety of laws, acts, and policies regarding ethnic cultures were established in Bangladesh to guide institutions like BNM.

In this context, this research examined the goals for which these policies were made, with a particular focus on the priority assigned to the preservation of cultures belonging to ethnic groups. It looked at the relevance of cultural preservation and explored the methods and rationale behind its implementation. The study investigated the objects collected from ethnic groups and displayed at BNM. Finally, the role of the BNM in collecting, preserving, and displaying the objects of ethnic groups, whether these collected and displayed objects are sufficient to introduce the small ethnic group's culture to the people, or whether there are some deficiencies, has been examined.

### **Literature Review**

The existing literature mostly focuses on property rights and socioeconomic status of small ethnic groups. As a result, there is a dearth of scholarly work pertaining to the museum's function in the preservation of ethnic culture in Bangladesh. Plant and Chakma (2011) primarily emphasized the need for safeguarding ethnic cultures, with a particular emphasis on the educational program. According to Sharmin (2011), ethnic groups face injustice in social interactions, relationships, religion, and linguistics. Despite examining economic and land rights, the underlying factors contributing to vulnerability remain unexplored, while their cultures rapidly change. Plant and Chakma (2011) suggested that ethnic groups in Chittagong Hill Tracts use their own languages, but less than 60% in northern Bengal do. Language loss affects flat-terrain ethnic groups, but no agreements are addressed for cultural preservation.

According to Roy and Chakma (2015), the presence of different cultures, heritages, languages, values, and practices has contributed to the development of a rich cultural heritage, ecological well-being, and achievement of SDGs within the nation. However, these individuals' valuable contributions were often overlooked and undervalued. Factors such as ignorance, discriminatory attitudes, and an entrenched nationalist mindset contribute to this oversight and undervaluation. Furthermore, the concept of indigenous development emphasizes the need to give particular attention to the culture and identity of ethnic communities for effective execution. In addition, museums care for ethnic cultural objects, often with spiritual significance, following ethnic authorities' instructions. This special care preserves the object's integrity and strengthens

relationships between museums and ethnic communities, thereby preserving the object's significance and fostering stronger connections between museums and ethnic communities (Lathrop, 2016).

Similarly, Kim (2011) advocates for a national museum in China to focus on 56 ethnic minorities. The research aims to highlight the importance of including small ethnic groups in museum representations, addressing the complex dynamics and challenges of these groups. It draws a parallel with the current situation in Bangladesh, where there is a lack of a museum that adequately represents the cultural diversity of its 50 ethnic groups. Olivares and Piatak (2021) conducted a study on the American Art Museum's racial and ethnic diversity and found that black participation was lower than white participation due to the museum's limited representation of diversity. They emphasized the importance of an inclusive approach, avoiding exclusivity and demonstrating respect for all individuals, to better reflect the experiences and contributions of black individuals (Olivares & Piatak, 2021).

According to Baten (2003), the establishment of the Ethnological Museum of Chittagong in 1974 aimed to enhance social cohesion between the Bengali population and other ethnic groups. The museum showcases the cultural and societal aspects of different communities by means of maps, photographs, models, and other artefacts. Despite the intended purpose of the Ethnological Museum to represent various ethnic groups, it falls short in its ability to comprehensively showcase all 50 ethnic groups present in Bangladesh. It is evident that broad collections and exhibitions of ethnic cultures can mitigate and address the preservation dilemma faced by the BNM and other museums in Bangladesh.

The existing literature mostly centers on land rights, human rights, and the susceptibility of ethnic cultures within the context of prevailing policies pertaining to small ethnic groups. However, not much research work has addressed the preservation and constraints associated with safeguarding ethnic traditions, together with the involvement of cultural institutions in alignment with the policies implemented in Bangladesh. As a result, this research has identified a lack of awareness regarding the significance of governmental policies and cultural institutions in preserving small ethnic cultures.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The study of ethnicity in social science began in the late 1960s and gained significant attention in the 1990s. Interactions between different groups form the collective or individual identity of ethnicity, rather than isolation. Static factors

like language, political organization, or religion do not determine ethnicity. Differentiation within social connections occurs when an individual perceives themselves as unique from others within the same group (Eriksen, 1993). The concept of ethnicity is relevant because many visitors to the BNM are from different ethnic groups in Bangladesh; their feelings of ethnicity grow while visiting the ethnic minorities' galleries at the BNM.

The rise of civilization and nation-states has led to the concept of ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples. States now employ three strategies: assimilating entropy-resistant elements, dominating minorities, and accepting multi-cultural ideology beyond single or multi-ethnic nationalism (Hirschman, 1970). Minority groups respond differently to state domination, with some voluntarily undergoing assimilation, while others acknowledge their subordinate status and coexist harmoniously within the nation-state, negotiating for limited autonomy in language, religion, and local political organization. However, these groups often exit the state, become isolated, and remain incompatible with state policy (Hirschman, 1970). Although the BNM has showcased objects from different ethnic groups, the display policy reflects relations between the state and ethnic minorities.

The 1960s saw the rise of multiculturalism and identity politics, leading to scrutiny of museum studies and anthropology. Western museums, like the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University, highlight cultural, racial, and ethnic distinctions, portraying ethnic cultures as 'primitive' and 'other' while presenting their own civilization as superior. These practices are closely linked to colonial and imperialist efforts, as they engage in the acquisition, conservation, and exhibition of ethnographic objects in line with their respective nations' expansionist agendas (Denton, 2013). The ethnic minorities' galleries of BNM are displayed as inferior to the galleries of the Bengali community.

During the 1980s, a small number of scholarly publications emerged that examined museum practices pertaining to ethnographic authority, the construction of traditions, the critical examination of colonial and postcolonial impacts on the representation of diverse cultures, ethical dilemmas faced by anthropologists, and the epistemological and analytical categorization of textual materials, artistic expressions, and cultural phenomena. The area of museum studies, much like academia and the media, has seen a significant impact from the phenomenon of 'the politicization of humanity'. Different political and economic facts influence the fields of the museum, such as research, display, and exhibition. Furthermore, critics of academic anthropology have played an important role in shaping the field of museums (Jones, 1993).

Museums play a crucial role in disseminating intercultural education and empowering historically marginalized groups. They can act as anthropologists by actively involving ethnic groups in planning and activities. However, some Marxist and post-modern Marxist scholars view museums as social institutions perpetuating capitalist oppression and colonialism. To understand the reasons behind different display methods for non-Western, ethnic, and traditional cultural artefacts, a critical viewpoint is needed to understand the rationale behind these methods. Jones (1993) highlights one of the museum's concerns, which is its propensity to create a misleading portrayal of non-Western society. Bengali people's items are preferred to be shown appropriately, but ethnic groups are only partly included in the BNM.

### **Methodology**

The study explores various policies, acts, and contracts related to the preservation of ethnic traditions in Bangladesh. It identifies several policies, such as the National Cultural Policy 2006, the *Khudro Nri-Goshti* Cultural Institution Act 2010, the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act 1950, the CHT Regulation 1900, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board Act 2014, the Hill Tracts Districts Act 1989, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council 1998 Act, the Rangamati Hill District Council Act 1998, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, the Bangladesh National Museum Act 2022, the Bangla Academy Act 2013, and the Archives Law 2019, all of which have direct and indirect connections to the rights of ethnic communities. Policy document analysis, a method of studying the nature of a policy document to examine its contents and underlying factors (Cardno, 2018), was utilized in this research.

One of the co-authors of this article is a curatorial officer at the BNM and has been employed there since January 2019. As stated in the Bangladesh National Museum Manual of 2011, the personnel of the Curatorial Department/Branch Museum are responsible for doing fundamental research on the artefacts acquired by the respective Department/Branch Museum. The researcher used the observation technique to gain insights and gather empirical evidence pertaining to the cultural practices associated with ethnic artefacts inside the BNM from January 2022 to June 2022. Furthermore, to collect primary data regarding ethnic objects, various aspects were considered, including the categorization of objects, the methods employed for collection, the timeframe of collection, and the identification of original register books, classification books, object information systems (OIS), and inventory forms utilized by the museum.

A total of 15 museum visitors, encompassing individuals from both ethnic and mainstream backgrounds who visited the galleries showcasing ethnic objects

during February 2022–April 2022, participated in in-depth interviews. And 05 KIIs have been conducted during May 2022–April 2022 among the distinguished present and former workers of the museum who participated in the curation of the ethnological artefacts. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym in order to ensure confidentiality. The interviews underwent transcription, and the resulting data was systematically recorded throughout the data management phase. A series of 15 in-depth interviews were produced, and then all the sets of data were searched for patterns in the meaning to find themes. That was the way the data was subjected to a rigors examination in order to identify recurring themes and prevalent meanings. Afterwards, within the framework of thematic analysis, relevant topics were identified, categorized and then redefined as new themes to facilitate the examination of the collected data.

## **Findings**

This part focuses on three particular issues, namely state policies, the collection of ethnic artefacts of the BNM, and the role of BNM in collecting and presenting these objects.

### ***State Policies to Safeguard Ethnic Culture***

Article 6(2) of the Constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh states, “The people of Bangladesh shall be known as *Bangalees* as a nation, and the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis.” Article 23 mandates the State to safeguard cultural traditions, promote national language, literature, and arts, and ensure all societal segments contribute to the advancement of the nation’s culture. According to Article 23A, “The State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects, and communities.” Although the constitution has differentiated the mainstream *Bangalee* culture, it declares to protect the culture of the ethnic communities of Bangladesh.

Moreover, the National Cultural Policy, 2006 aims to promote cultural development and social cohesion among small ethnic groups by safeguarding and nurturing tribal populations’ cultural heritage. The BNM preserves historical, ethnographic, and archeological monuments, while the Bangladesh Folk Art and Crafts Foundation create a mini-Bangladesh. The Ministry of Cultural affairs’ (hereafter MOCA) organizations safeguard tribal language, culture, and heritage. The Bangladesh Culture and Heritage Foundation is tasked with safeguarding the country’s cultural heritage, including tribal institutions, and integrating tribal communities into the broader culture, while the Ministry of Education is tasked with establishing various relevant subjects in universities. The National Cultural



Policy 2006 serves as a guide for various organizations to protect ethnic culture, aligning with the constitution of Bangladesh.

Likewise, the *Khudro Nri-Goshti* Cultural Institution Act, 2010 aims to protect regional cultural heritage by facilitating the construction and advancement of cultural institutions for the growth and development of small ethnic groups. These institutions must focus on the history, social, and cultural heritage of each community, organize seminars, conferences, exhibitions, and publish books and periodicals. Additionally, they must celebrate national days, conduct inter-district cultural exchange programs, highlight regional cultural activities, organize events and competitions, provide financial grants, honor masterpieces and artists, establish museums, and implement government plans for cultural development.

Furthermore, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord was signed on December 2, 1997, and it aims to expedite socioeconomic development while enhancing the political, social, cultural, educational, and economic rights of CHT residents. The agreement mandates the preservation of tribal culture and customs as well as elementary education in the mother tongue. The government ensures to support and patronize the growth of tribal cultural activities across the country.

Additionally, the Bangladesh National Museum Act-2022 defines antiquity as ancient, historical, ethnological, artistic, aesthetic, and scientifically important artifacts. According to the Act, the BNM's activities include investigating, collecting, preserving, researching, and displaying ethnological objects. The Bangla Academy Act 2013 has provisions for preserving the language, literature, and culture of small ethnic groups and publishing books on their lives and cultures.

The aforementioned policies address sociocultural growth, preservation, collecting, display, research, and publication of ethnic communities and their cultures. All policies have instructed various agencies to carry out their assigned obligations to protect the ethnic traditions of Bangladesh. State policies require diverse institutions to actively play their safeguarding roles to ensure the viability of ethnic cultures.

### ***Ethnic Groups' Object Diversity at BNM***

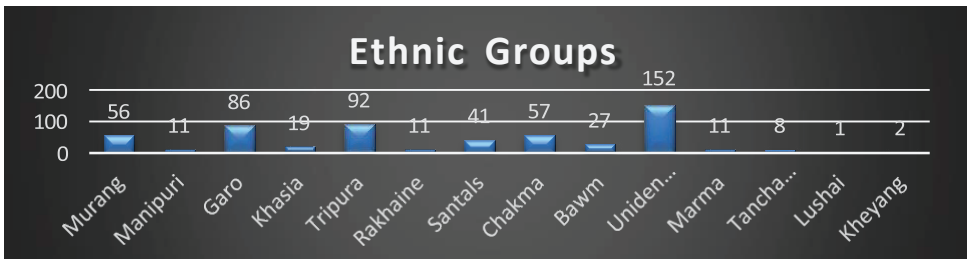
The Department of Ethnography and Decorative Art at BNM has collected a total of 12,747 artifacts. Out of the aforementioned objects, 648 are connected to 18 specific ethnic groups of Bangladesh. Ethnic artefacts include everyday life including tools, fabrics, decorations, metal, ornament, arms and armour. The majority of the artefacts in the collection come from the Santals, Garo, Chakma, Marma, and Manipuri communities. According to the data provided by BNM's object Registration Branch, a total of 461 objects have been effectively classified into distinct ethnic groups. In contrast, the concerned department and the



Registration Branch of BNM are unable to determine the particular names of the communities for the remaining 187 objects due to a lack of sufficient record.

In terms of number of ethnic groups, the museum has acquired artefacts from several ethnic groups in the CHT, including Chakma, Murang, Marma, Lushai, Kheyang, Bawm, and Tanchangya. The Chakma and Murang artefacts constitute the majority of the collection. Various artefacts have been collected from the Garo, Tripura, Khasia, and Manipuri communities in the northeastern part of Bangladesh. The collection of artefacts from North Bengal has been limited to the Santal community. Furthermore, some objects are from the Rakhaine community. On the contrary, a significant portion of textiles were not accurately assigned to their respective ethnic groups due to a lack of recorded data at the Registration Branch.

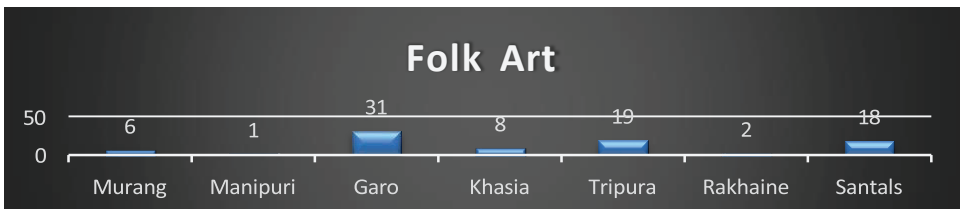
**Figure 1: Number of objects of ethnic groups at BNM**



Source: Department’s Object Register Books, BNM (1983-2022)

Moreover, the BNM has curated a collection of folk-art objects from various ethnic groups, including the Santal, Rakhaine, Tripura, Khasia, Garo, Manipuri, and Murang communities. The collection includes 31, 19, and 18 artefacts from Garo, Tripura, and Santal ethnic groups, with no notable number of other ethnic objects.

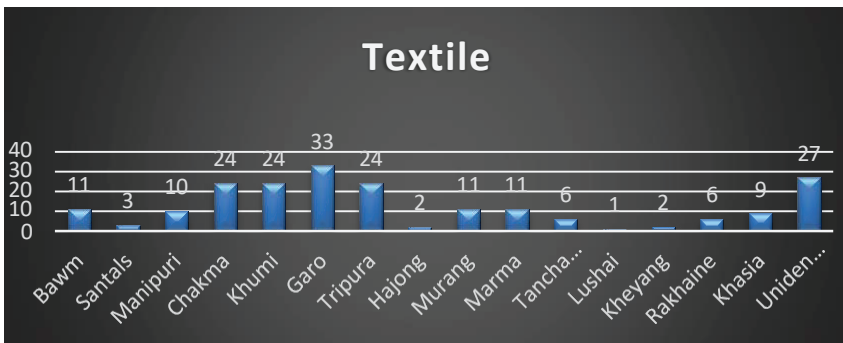
**Figure 2: Number of folk-art objects**



Source: Department’s Object Register Books, BNM (1983-2022)

Likewise, the textile objects acquired at BNM are dresses worn during festivals, ceremonies, rites, and occasions for dancing and singing. The museum has collected textile objects from 12 different ethnic groups. A collection of 33 Garo artefacts and 24 artefacts are from the Tripura, Khumi, and Chakma ethnic groups. Due to the fact that the department and Registration Branch were not able to identify some textile objects, there are 27 unidentified textile objects. Marma, Murang, and Bawm all have the 11 objects. The Manipuri ethnic group is noted for 10, while the Khasia has nine textile objects.

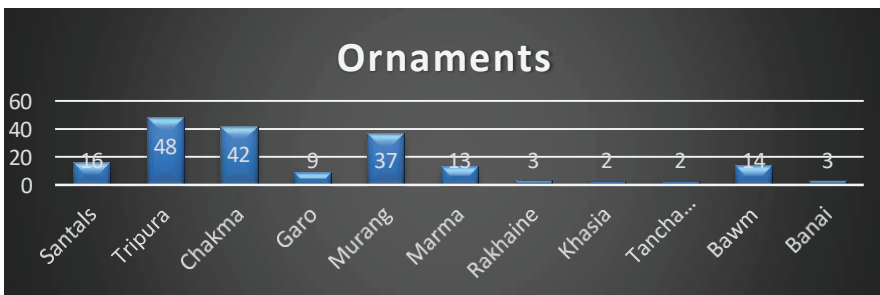
**Figure 3: Ethnic groups' objects of textile**



Source: Department's Object Register Book, BNM (1983-2022)

Furthermore, the museum collected ethnic ornaments made of silver and metal. The BNM collection includes 48, 42, and 37 ornaments from Tripura, Chakma, and Murang communities, while Santal, Garo, Marma, and Bawm communities contributed 16, 9, 13, and 14 ornaments. The Banai and Tanchangya have three ornaments, while Tanchangya, Khasia, and Rakhaine groups each have two.

**Figure 4: Ornament objects**



Source: Department's Object Register Book, BNM (1983-2022)

Finally, metal objects are essential in everyday life and have decorative and artistic significance. Murang has a pair of metal objects, while Marma, Tripura, and Garo each have a single metal object. The BNM acquired seven Santal and three Garo musical instruments, and the Garo, Santal, and Marma ethnic groups have 5, 1, and 2 weaponry and armour objects, respectively.

### ***Role of BNM in Collecting, Displaying, and Preserving***

The BNM has a comprehensive guidebook, the Bangladesh National Museum Manual 2011, outlining its day-to-day operations, including collecting, maintaining, exhibiting, and conducting research. This handbook serves as a reference book for the museum's operations and outlines six methods for acquiring objects: collection tour, gift, exchange, loan and purchase, and excavation. According to the manual, the museum's primary goal is to preserve and maintain a nation's cultural heritage, particularly its ethnic traditions. The BNM has curated a diverse collection of artefacts from various ethnic groups. According to Kabita Begum (46), a senior curatorial officer at the BNM,

The governing bodies for object collection have taken away the collection authority from the curatorial department. There are some governing bodies for object collection; these committees decide what to collect or not. That's why the museum authority is, to some extent, reluctant to allow us to go on a collection tour and collect if our collected object is not granted by the committee. The museum acquires the majority of ethnic objects through purchases from private collectors. The museum keeps a positive relationship with these collectors, who sell ethnic objects to the museum for money. The museum staff members sometimes travel to various regions to collect ethnic objects. Also, the museum acquires ethnic objects through gifts, exchanges, loans, purchases, or excavations.

The BNM conducted a series of collection tours from 1985 to 1988 in various regions of Bangladesh to collect ethnic objects for the museum's collection. The specific dates of these tours were as follows: June 12, 1985 (Rajshahi); January 6, 1986 (Rajshahi); March 6, 1988 (Tangail); July 12, 1987 (Jamalpur and Mymensingh); June 8, 1988 (Bandarban); July 12, 1987 (Rangamati); October 16, 1986 (Chittagong and Rangamati) and May 30, 1988 (Borguna and Patuakhali). Zinnat Mahrukh Banu, a retired curatorial officer aged 68, recounted her early involvement in museum work:

In the past, we had the authority to collect objects and take decisions. It was a decentralized authority for a particular department. Getting

approved by the higher committee posed no issues. Thus, in the early days of my profession, I made all efforts for the museum. I along with my husband used to travel to the CHT on the weekend to collect ethnic objects. I visited several regions to collect ethnic objects. In the CHT, I developed a relationship with local people, even though I donned their clothing. That was how I acquired artefacts directly from the ethnic groups.

The BNM mainly uses the purchase process as its primary method for acquiring ethnic artefacts, collecting objects from local markets through tours and direct transactions with specific sellers. This practice involves acquiring ethnic artefacts from individuals outside of the institution who engage in regular sales of such items, making it a key strategy in the museum's collection strategy. Atiar Rahman (57), a curatorial officer, talked about why they cannot go for collection tours:

The higher committee may cancel an object if you submit it. The authority seems reluctant to spend money on collection tours. The authority requires owners or sellers to present videos and photos of the expected object before the committee. If the committee considers the facts as significant, they will allow us for collection. This system seems like a barrier for us to explore and collect objects from ethnic cultures through collection tours.

Another curatorial officer, Md. Kalam (53) opined about existing collection systems and documentation:

The collectors assert that their purpose for travelling to various regions within ethnic localities is to acquire ethnic artefacts. These collectors essentially engage in a commercial enterprise by selling diverse objects to museums. Upon arriving at the museum, individuals bring with them an extensive inventory of items intended for sale to the institution. When the museum acquires certain artefacts, collectors provide pertinent contextual information related to those pieces.

However, the BNM has showcased a total of 5,717 objects across its 45 galleries. It is worth noting that only 159 objects representing 10 ethnic groups have been exhibited in two specific galleries for the museum's visitors. This indicates that a mere 2.7 percent of the displayed objects pertain to ethnic groups. A visitor to this particular gallery, Md. Bashar (32), expressed his observation, stating,

We have a number of small ethnic groups, but we don't know much about them. Showing additional ethnic aspects in the museum would

enhance people's understanding of various ethnic groups. I can only see 4/5 of the ethnic groups' objects here; I wish I could learn about all ethnic traditions. This is insufficient. I propose adding galleries and expanding the quantity of ethnic group artefacts.

Another curatorial officer of the museum, Md. Azahar (50) said about how they chose the display decision,

The display decision is made by the executive head of the BNM, but the curatorial departments present the objects for the approval of the executive head. We choose objects for display based on their representative socio-cultural, historical, political, religious, regional, and decorative significance. But nowadays we have an annual performance agreement with the ministry, and each of them is included in the objectives to achieve the target regardless of quality. But as we don't have sufficient ethnic objects in our store, we cannot go for a more comprehensive display of them.

However, the preservation, conservation, and research on 648 ethnic objects are less selective at BNM. Various categories, such as folk art, decorations, metal, and musical instruments, are housed in the BNM's several object stores. The BNM does not keep ethnic group items in distinct stores. Objects of mainstream people may mix with these things. While mainstream people's artefacts are receiving conservation attention from the BNM's conservation section, relatively few ethnic things are receiving this attention. According to curator Hafiza Khatun (35) of the BNM,

Somehow ethnic objects are less chosen for conservation because the total number of ethnic objects is fewer than other objects in the BNM. Despite the fact that there has been an opportunity to study ethnic cultures and their items since the BNM's inception, no BNM personnel have performed research on ethnic cultures and objects yet.

## **Discussion**

The section highlights that state policies have not prioritized conserving ethnic culture, but rather emphasized developments that are part of the mainstreaming process, even instead of focusing on its preservation.

### ***Generalization***

Bangladesh's diverse cultural landscape includes multiple ethnic groups (MOCA, 2013), but its national cultural policy and organizations lack clear

functions to provide for their unique needs and aspirations. Some ethnic groups' cultures are emphasized due to demographics, political significance, and interconnectedness, while others have lower recognition, limited interaction, and increased isolation. For instance, the ethnic groups of CHT get special status due to their history of political insurgency, and ethnic minorities in northern Bangladesh have received less attention (IRI, 2020). As a result, the absence of community-specific policies means that these groups are expected to maintain their distinctiveness without significant official intervention to preserve their traditions, heritages, and customs.

### *Mainstreaming*

State policy aims to integrate small ethnic communities into society, with ethnic-cultural institutions tasked with familiarizing them with the broader heritage and culture, including providing education in the Bengali language (MOCA, 2013). The process may be likened to the assimilation of various ethnic groups into the cultural and traditional practices of the Bengali community (Hirschman, 1970). The process of assimilation among ethnic minorities occurs due to the alignment of the state's structure with dominant cultures, customs, and education systems (Hirschman, 1970).

Traditional institutions and leadership, in addition to MoCHTA, RC, and HDCs, are expected to play a significant role in land and revenue matters in CHT (PADECO, 2012). The state aims to transform ethnic groups of CHTs into revenue-generating sources and integrate them into the legal system. The government aims to establish accountability through the state judicial system, while implementing various legal frameworks, including laws, acts, contracts, and agreements, to facilitate ethnic community development. Development policies involve familiarizing ethnic communities with modern technology, capitalist economics, and mainstream education through governmental policies tailored to their cultural needs. The development plans in practice exhibit a significant bias towards Western modernization concepts, disregarding the cultural diversity, local context, and traditions of small ethnic groups (Escobar, 1992).

### *Terms for Subordination*

The debate surrounding the classification and primitiveness of ethnic groups in Bangladeshi modernity, the divide between a "primitive tribal/upajati/small ethnic group and ethnic minority/ativashi margin" and a "modern national mainstream" develops under the era of exclusive governmentality (Mahmood et al., 2019). African museums, for example, were largely built during the colonial

period with a view to studying race, evolution, and culture; colonizers represent them as ‘primitive’ by the ethnic relics displayed in museums. Now the government commonly uses “colonial legacy” to explain these institutions and neglects the local communities they must serve (Fogelman, 2008).

### **Culture Change**

According to the Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act, 2010, the cultural institutions in Rajshahi, Moulovibazar, Netrokona, Rangamati, Bandarban, Khagrachari, and Cox’s Bazar are insufficient to accommodate diverse ethnic groups. This is due to the fact that the number of ethnic groups surpasses the capacity of these institutions. Many organizations aim to integrate marginalized ethnic communities into mainstream culture, promoting growth and cultural shift. These institutions have museums of their own to present ethnic cultures, and the BNM may depend on them to get authentic objects.

The National Cultural Policy of 2006 aims to protect and improve tribal cultural heritage while promoting assimilation and integration into national culture. However, ethnic groups often face perceptions of being less developed and adhering to traditional practices. The state employs a development model characterized by a hierarchical approach, whereby the decision-making process predominantly prioritizes the interests and perspectives of the dominant ethnic group (Haque, 2018). The policies aim to promote interactions between the mainstream population and ethnic groups, fostering mutual acquaintance and understanding of mainstream culture, traditions, history, and customs, resulting in later cultural alterations.

### ***Policy and Object Diversity***

The practice of preserving the variety of ethnic groups, in accordance with the mainstreaming approach of the policy, aims to broaden its scope. This perspective suggests that possessing knowledge of a few ethnic groups implies a comprehensive understanding of all ethnic groups.

### **Inadequate Collection of Objects**

The BNM has a collection of 93,470 artefacts, with the Department of Ethnography and Decorative Art responsible for the curation and study of a diverse range of ethnic artefacts. This department has 648 artefacts from various ethnic groups, constituting around 0.6% of the museum’s overall collection. Moreover, the department is part of four curatorial departments, with a proportion of 1% of the population belonging to various ethnic groups (BBS,



2023). The current collection of the museum is inadequate when considering both the whole collection of the museum and the population of the country. Because of the power of social elites and the government, museums cannot always do a good job of representing ethnic groups. This leads to cultural assimilation instead of promoting cultural differentiation between dominant social classes and marginalized minority groups, as reformist ideas reflect (Bennett, 2009).

The museum seems to provide a diminished level of value or relevance to the collection of objects associated with the small ethnic communities. Government policy traces the operations of the BNM. The Bengali-dominated unitary state in Bangladesh, which promotes majoritarian nationalism, is the primary source of conflict and domination, and the government's homogenization strategy hinders ethnic peace (Chakraborty, 2014). The examination of the assortment and portrayal of cultural artefacts and fields is a component of a broader examination that highlights the exclusion or marginalization of certain groups' perspectives within the public domain (Macdonald, 2006).

### **Generalization within Some Ethnic Groups**

The BNM has curated a collection of artefacts from 14 ethnic groups, despite the state's tendency to generalize small ethnic groups. Since 1983, the BNM has failed to collect a comprehensive collection of artefacts from all 50 ethnic groups in Bangladesh. The museum claims that visitors can understand all other ethnic groups in Bangladesh, while 14 ethnic groups can protect their cultural artefacts. It is imperative that the individual responsible for the storage of these objects comprehend the significance of the collection, and ensure that each object is preserved separately to facilitate their enduring exhibition in the forthcoming years (Christenson, 1979). However, the BNM houses ethnic artefacts in a generalist storage facility that lacks the necessary conditions for ensuring their long-term preservation and future use.

Moreover, the BNM has a significant collection of artefacts from Tripura, Garo, Murang, Chakma, and Santals, with limited representation from other ethnic groups like Lushai and Kheyang, primarily due to policies focusing on those groups. The most fundamental criticism of museums is that they portray things from traditional communities as primitive. Thus, various publications and museum displays show that ethnic objects are as primitive as the notion of primitivism (Jones, 1993). The BNM categorizes all ethnic groups as minorities, naming galleries 'ethnic minorities in Bangladesh,' showcasing a diverse collection of objects from a few large groups.

Finally, the BNM collects artefacts from ethnic communities with large populations, close proximity, and political significance. The smaller groups often lack interaction with the mainstream population, resulting in their lack of official recognition or registration under the BNM. This is due to state policy prioritizing certain ethnic communities, as they often lack significant political influence.

### **Unidentified Object**

Museums, via the collection and exhibition of items associated with certain cultures, ethnic groups, historical eras, or artists, serve as platforms for the representation and construction of identities (Handler, 1993). The BNM has 187 artefacts of ethnic groups, but their specific ethnic affiliations are not yet established. Despite a well-established documentation process, the BNM struggles to accurately identify some artefacts associated with ethnic groups. The issue is linked to state policies, which do not adequately address the identification of all ethnic groups (Bangladesh Gazette, 2022). The BNM's failure to identify ethnic attributes demonstrates a failure to recognize cultural collectives. In this context, it is the responsibility of a museologist to ensure the meticulous documentation and organization of acquired artefacts, ensuring that future generations and scholars may get genuine value from them (Christenson, 1979).

### ***Policy and Role of BNM***

The section discusses the ineffective collection process and lack of ethnographic tours of the BNM, resulting in a lack of specific objects for specific ethnic groups.

### **Inappropriate Collection Process**

Acquiring objects from vendors or local markets via intermediaries is not an appropriate approach for collecting artefacts, since it may result in a lack of accurate identification of their specific ethnic origins. For instance, the documentation of a Khasia community object, which may be recorded as Mro objects inside the BNM. Furthermore, the absence of a systematic collection procedure may result in the items gathered in the BNM being unclassified. The criticism of museums by Jones (1993) highlights the significant impact of distorting ethnic and traditional societies. Dakmunda, accession no. 1987.7501 documented as cloth used by Garo women from the upper part to extend below the knee, which is actually the traditional dress called Gena, and the Garo people become annoyed by seeing the display of it.

### **Lack of Ethnographic Approach**

An ethnographic-based collection tour is deemed appropriate for the purpose of gathering ethnic artefacts from various ethnic communities. Ethnography enables researchers to establish a strong rapport and cultivate trust with the individuals under study, facilitating the creation of a credible, rigorous, and authentic narrative of a specific society (Fetterman, 2010). Following the ethnographic approach, the staff of BNM can acquire objects by directly engaging with members of the ethnic communities. Engaging in participant observation, a method established since the inception of anthropology, and applying the cultural relativity approach within the field, will provide divergent interpretations, enhancing the contextualization of ethnic items (Fogelman, 2008).

### **Insufficient Collection Tour**

Doing a collection tour has considerable importance as it enables direct engagement with the community, facilitating a deeper understanding of their culture and artefacts. Subsequently, this firsthand experience informs the process of acquiring objects for museum collections, imbuing them with a sense of authenticity. In contrast, the acquired item lacks inherent authenticity since collectors and sellers sometimes engage in deceptive practices, misrepresenting the object's true origins or substituting it with other ethnographic artefacts instead of fulfilling the museum's desired specifications. To date, the BNM has undertaken only a total of eight collecting tours with the purpose of acquiring ethnic groups' artefacts. It seems that the BNM may not fully acknowledge the significance of conducting collecting tours for ethnic item collections.

### **Conclusion**

The study reveals that Bangladesh's state policies for preserving ethnic cultures lack specific measures or goals, and instead aim to provide a generic framework for all ethnic groups. These policies often prioritize infrastructure development over cultural heritage preservation, defining ethnic groups as regressive and underdeveloped. The policies often use hierarchical terminology and focus on facilitating the transition away from traditional customs and cultural practices, rather than addressing the unique needs and goals of each ethnic group. The BNM collected only 0.6% of the available artefacts, which is insufficient to understand the diverse characteristics of Bangladesh's ethnic groups. The museum focuses on 14 distinct ethnic groups within its over fifty ethnic groups, limiting its collection to six types of artefacts. The BNM collects artefacts from known ethnic groups, including Tripura, Garo, Chakma, and Santal people. It only displays 2.7% of these artefacts, which is insufficient for comprehensively

showcasing ethnic groups. Additionally, there is a lack of ethnographic approach-based collection tours, which may allow collecting from first-hand contact with the community.

The assertion that museum policy can no longer claim impartiality and universality is supported by Jones (1993), who argues that representation, sponsorship, curation, and other aspects of museum activity are inherently political in nature. Museums globally have encountered the challenge of addressing a multitude of perspectives among individuals belonging to local ethnic communities (Jones, 1993). Similarly, the BNM has been exhibiting skewed practices in its interactions with ethnic communities in Bangladesh since 1983.

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