

Chapter 6

Traditional Economic Activities of Indigenous Women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: Exploring Indigenous Women's Role in Sustaining Traditional Economic Activities

Parboti Roy
North South University, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

There are about 1% Indigenous population in Bangladesh and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is one of the regions of Bangladesh resided by thirteen indigenous people's communities. The indigenous peoples' lives is intrinsically linked to the nature, culture and their tradition. Traditional economic activities are important aspects of subsistence of indigenous people and women play a crucial role in preserving these activities through their knowledge and management skills. However, their traditional economic activities have been hampered by a range of factors. The study concentrates on this issue as it posits that indigenous women in the CHT provide remarkable contributions through the maintenance of their traditional economic activities which not only have traditional and cultural significance but also contain economic value. The study is based on secondary data. It employs theoretical and conceptual framework of post-colonial indigenous feminism and feminist economic analysis of women's domestic and subsistence activities as a means to explore indigenous women's persistent efforts to continue their traditional economic activities. The study argues that indigenous women in the CHT have been able to uphold their traditional economic practices at both an individual and collective level through the assistance of local organizations formed by the indigenous peoples. These efforts by indigenous women manifest the 'solidarity political economy' against the global political economy.

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INTRODUCTION

There are 370 million indigenous and tribal people in the world with distinctive cultures and traditions and in Bangladesh there are 45 groups of indigenous peoples reside both in different districts of the plains and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region (Vinding&Kampbel 2012 pp. 8- 11). The indigenous peoples in the CHT have diverse cultures and traditions different from the dominant Bengali population in Bangladesh. The CHT is located in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh which is comprised of three districts named Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachori. This hilly region of the country is a home to eleven indigenous groups. These groups are the *Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Lushai, Mro, Khumi, Pankhoa, Bawm, Chak, Tanchangya and Khyang*. The CHT was historically a part of the British colony for nearly two hundred years. Studies reveal that the British colonized the CHT in order to exploit the natural resources and dominate the indigenous peoples (Uddin 2008 p. 39). As part of their imperialistic project, the British started interfering in the economy of the CHT indigenous peoples by imposing restrictions on the traditional mode of production called ‘*jum* cultivation’ or slash-and-burn or shifting cultivation (Nasreen and Togawa 2010 p. 93). Such profit maximization projects continued in the Pakistan period and current Bangladesh too by implementing multiple development initiatives in the name of modernization that impacted upon the livelihoods of indigenous peoples (Clarke 2001 p. 424; Barua 2010 p. 372) and ignored indigenous local knowledge. Likewise, the traditional economic activities of indigenous peoples were hampered. Traditional economies are an important part of indigenous people’s lives not only for their economic value but also for the existence and sustenance of traditional activities (Koukanen 2011 p. 215). The study explores how indigenous women in the CHT resiliently practice their traditional economic activities despite multiple challenges. More precisely, the purpose of the study is to examine the degree to which indigenous women’s participation in traditional economic activities has persisted or been eroded or transformed as a consequence of multifaceted changes in the CHT.

Purpose and Methodology

The major objective of the study is to analyze the persistence of traditional economic activities of indigenous women in the CHT. To fulfill this purpose the study demarcates several specific objectives as follows:

- To analyse impact of development intervention on indigenous women from the post-colonial indigenous feminist perspective, More specifically, to examine indigenous women’s economic status through the British colonial period followed by the postcolonial government of Pakistan and most recently the government of Bangladesh which was installed after the British colonial and Pakistan period.
- To assess the state of indigenous women’s traditional economic activities in the contemporary period.
- To explore indigenous women’s persistent practise of traditional economic activities in the mainstream setting.
- The study is based qualitative method of employing secondary data source. The following quantitative materials will be examined-

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