

Maidul Alam Chaklader, 2019

Volume 5 Issue 1, pp. 328-349

Date of Publication: 29th March 2019

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2019.51.328349>

This paper can be cited as: Chaklader, M. A., (2019). Understanding Ethnic Identity in the Context of Internal Migration: A Case Study of University Students of Ethnic Minority Origins in Urban Bangladesh. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 5(1), 328-349.

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UNDERSTANDING ETHNIC IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNAL MIGRATION: A CASE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF ETHNIC MINORITY ORIGINS IN URBAN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Although much scholarly attention has been given to the historical and contemporary struggles of ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh especially related to the politics of indigeneity, this study specifically seeks to obtain a holistic understanding of the process of renegotiation and maintenance of ethnic identity as experienced by university students of ethnic minority origins in Bangladesh who have migrated from their ancestral home to urban centers. An ethnographic approach based on key informant interviews and focus groups was employed to collect qualitative data. Findings suggest that the notion of ethnic identity is not static; rather it is complex and dynamic. Although the sense of belonging to a distinct ethnic group is very important to all study participants whenever issues affecting all ethnic minorities in Bangladesh came up by dissolving inter-ethnic boundaries, participants constructed a rather homogenous ethnic identity primarily underpinned by their historical and contemporary marginal status. It is also found that ethnic migrant students with higher levels of previous ethnic involvement better maintain their ethnic identity compared to students with less previous group involvement. By

revealing the importance to consider agentic forces, this finding contradicts with social identity theory which has traditionally undermined individual's agency. Earlier studies have shown that ethnic students with higher previous ethnic involvement completely replace their previous social support network by creating a new one in the new environment. However, participants in this study simultaneously retained and accessed both their old and new social support networks depending on situational demands and opportunities. Findings also indicate that ethnic students who felt negatively about their ethnic group in the new environment showed lower self-esteem and increased alienation from their ethnic group. Relevant policy implications and future research directions have been outlined based on the study findings and discussion.

Keywords

Ethnic Identity, Migration, Situational Negotiation of Identity, Ethnic Minorities, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

1.1 Disagreements over the Number of Groups and Population Size of the Ethnic Minorities

There has been an ongoing debate in the last 3 decades between government statistics and ethnic minority leaders regarding the number of distinct ethnic groups and the size of ethnic minority population in Bangladesh (Chakma & Maitrot, 2016). Different rights based organizations and some scholars have argued that more than 45 ethnic minority groups inhabited Bangladesh before Independence in 1971 but Government of Bangladesh (GOB) officially recognized only 27 ethnic minorities in the Small Ethnic Minority Cultural Institute Act of 2010 (Barman & Neo, 2014). Continuous disagreements over the size of the ethnic minority population juxtapose, on one hand Bangladesh government claiming ethnic minorities represent only 1.10 percent of the total population and on the other hand, ethnic minority leaders claiming that it is actually 2 percent or more (Barman & Neo, 2014). According to Minority Rights Group International (2018), Bangladesh government may have deliberately made strategic measures over the years in order to officially lower the population size and group numbers of ethnic minorities so that the minority groups' main claim for the status of 'indigenous people' along with other legitimate demands could be more easily dismissed. It needs to be mentioned here that Bangladesh Government has, on numerous occasions, over time dismissed ethnic minority groups' demand for the status of 'indigenous people' on various grounds (Alamgir, 2018; Yasmin, 2014). Even with these historical (since the birth of Bangladesh in 1971) and

contemporary disagreements over the population size and number of ethnic minority groups, it is widely accepted that there are many ethnic minority groups in Bangladesh who are distinct in terms of their language, culture, religion and belief system, clothing, dietary intake, health-care practices and in some cases livelihood strategies, kinship and marriage patterns and habitats (Adnan, 2004). Some of these ethnic minority groups live in the plain land while others live in the hilly areas of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region (Mohsin, 2010).

1.2 Mixed Terminologies: Tribal? Ethnic Minority? Indigenous People? Adibashi? Upajati?

Different terms are being used by different sections of the ethnic majority Bengali population throughout Bangladesh to refer to its non-Bengali populations. Government officials and indigenous leaders have strongly disagreed over these differences. The term “upajati” (literally “sub-nation” and akin to the word “tribal” in English) has been preferred by some GOB officials by directly rejecting the use of the words, such as: “adibashi” (indigenous) and “indigenous” while referring to the non-Bengali populations (Roy, 2012). Community leaders and vocal members of the non-Bengali ethnic groups, in contrast, prefer the term “indigenous” in English, and “adibashi” in Bengali (Roy, 2012). The Bengali term “upajati” (sub-nation) and the English term “tribe”, have been firmly rejected by ethnic leaders due to these terms’ inherent and historical associated connotations of “backwardness” and “primitiveness” (Roy, 2012).

In 2011, while briefing foreign diplomats and UN agencies in Dhaka, Bangladesh, the then foreign minister clearly declared that GOB does not recognize the claim of “indigenous peoples”; rather these people should be known as ethnic minorities (The Daily Star, 2011). In the same event, it was stated that GOB is particularly concerned over attempts by some segments at home and abroad to identify the ethnic minority groups as indigenous people (The Daily Star, 2011). Few scholars and indigenous leaders have speculated that the government is probably under the impression that recognizing the claim of indigenous people might mean additional responsibility from the government’s side to bear (Roy, 2012). It needs to be clarified that in this paper the term “ethnic minority” has been used deliberately due to the fact that the ethnic minority groups of Bangladesh have not yet officially been recognized as the indigenous people of Bangladesh by the government. By using the term “ethnic minority”, this study does not, by any means, undermine the ‘authenticity’ and ‘credibility’ of the claim of “indigenous people” made by the ethnic minority groups of Bangladesh. A critical examination of the politics of ethnic identity and indigeneity is not the main focus of the study presented in this paper.

1.3 Socio-Economic Profile of the Ethnic Minorities in Bangladesh

Excluding a few exceptions, *the overall socio-economic profile of the ethnic minority groups in Bangladesh is a cause for serious concern* (Roy, 2012). Some of the hardcore poor of Bangladesh are found among the ethnic minority communities (Roy, 2012). The level of social awareness related to education and health among them is very low (Barkat et al. 2009a; Barkat et al. 2009b). Many suffer from ethnic prejudice, ill-health, poor nutritional conditions and bad hygiene. But Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics does not keep adequately disaggregated data on the ethnic minority groups (Barau et al., 2019). *From a critical point of view, it may be considered that the absence of data itself is an act of discrimination and deprivation* (Roy, 2012). Without understanding the existing socio-economic context of the ethnic minority groups accurately, it is quite impossible to formulate targeted programme and policy interventions to alleviate their poor conditions.

Bangladesh has achieved incredible progress with regard to reducing extreme poverty in recent years (Chakma & Maitrot, 2016). In 2010, the percentage of extreme poor in the total population was 17.6 against 13.1 in 2013 and 12.4 in 2014 (Sen & Ali, 2015). This success was however only partly shared with ethnic minorities (Chakma & Maitrot, 2016). As mentioned in the previous paragraph, GOB official data on ethnicity and poverty is scarce. Applying the Direct Calorie Intake (DCI) method, Barkat et al. (2009a) found that among 10 plain land ethnic communities in Greater Sylhet and Mymensingh, 60% of the ethnic minority people were absolute poor compared to only 39.5% of rural Bengali. Using a similar method, Barkat et al. (2009b) found in the CHT region approximately 62% of households in the CHT region, irrespective of ethnicity, live below the absolute poverty line (below 2,122 k.cal), while about 36% are hardcore poor (below 1,805 k.cal) (Barkat et al. 2009b).

In a more recent work, it is claimed that “a significant portion of the ethnic minority population continues to be deprived of basic socio-economic rights, including education, healthcare, food and nutritional security, access to safe drinking water, mains electricity, and so forth” (Roy & Chakma, 2015, p. 3). Bangladesh has also made remarkable progress in the fields of primary school enrolment, gender parity in primary and secondary level education, lowering the infant and under-five mortality rate and maternal mortality ratio, improving immunization coverage and reducing the incidence of communicable diseases stipulated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Roy & Chakma, 2015). *However, ethnic minority peoples in Bangladesh are still lagging far behind in many of these key goals and targets, if not all* (Roy &

Chakma, 2015). The ethnic minority peoples of the CHT in the south- eastern Bangladesh are highly vulnerable due to common occurrence of flash-floods, landslides, monsoon storms, and above all poor livelihood they live (Barau et al., 2019).

2. Scope of the Research

Although much scholarly attention on ethnic minorities in Bangladesh focused primarily on their *historical, socioeconomic, cultural, political and religious domination by the then East Pakistan regime (before the Independence of Bangladesh in 1971) and subsequently Bangladesh government and armed forces* (Adnan, 2004; Ahmed, 1993; Levene, 1999; Mohsin 2010; Van Schendel et al., 2000); *recent scholarly attention also covers issues such as: ethno-botany, ethno-pharmacology, health and treatment-seeking behaviour, societal wellbeing, sustainable development, forest resource management, political economy of displacement, gender issues and livelihood practices* etc. (Ahmed, 2012; Barau et al., 2019; Chaklader, 2018; Guhathakurta, 2012; Kadir et al., 2012; Khisha et al., 2013; Nasrin, 2018; Nath et al., 2011; Partha & Hossain, 2007; Rahman, 2013; Rahmatullah, 2011; Uddin et al., 2013). There is a significant lack of literature on issues specifically relating to internal migration and ethnic identity of ethnic minority people in Bangladesh. According to global research, although some migrants move to a new place in order to access improved education, employment, public services, health care facilities etc., exposure to a new environment demands integration into the dominant culture (held by the ethnic and religious majority groups), which could be very challenging and stressful (Palinkas et al., 2003). *Migration to a new place thus inherently requires acculturation, a process through which migrants adapt to the host culture involving a subsequent change in identity behaviour, beliefs and attitudes.* Chakma and Akhy (2015) explored the causes of internal migration but the study only focused on ethnic minorities migrating from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region to plain land Bangladesh. Due to its cross-sectional survey research design, it failed to capture the inherent nuances and complexities of the process of internal migration with reference to adjustment of ethnic identity in the altered environment. Moreover, the study site was in a specific area near Chittagong city and therefore, the study could not cover other urban areas in Bangladesh. Using a qualitative approach Visser (2015) investigated how ethnic minority university students adapted to their altered environment when they migrated from CHT to Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. He problematizes the concept of indigeneity in Bangladesh by critically comparing between the notions of indigeneity with its inherent

association with traditional mode of economy (land based) and that of modernity, with its inherent association with urban lifestyle and an industrial mode of economy. This study also focused only on the ethnic students from CHT region migrating to Dhaka, thus excluding students from other ethnic groups migrating to Dhaka and to other urban areas in Bangladesh. Previously, other scholars have investigated the politics of ethnic identity and indigeneity but specifically in the context of CHT which excluded other ethnic groups living outside CHT region (Bashar, 2011; Chakma, 2010; Chowdhury, 2008; Uddin, 2010; Yasmin, 2014).

Ethnic minority students are increasingly migrating to urban areas all over the country for higher education (Visser, 2015). *This paper seeks to illustrate a holistic understanding of the process of renegotiation and maintenance of ethnic identity experienced by university students of ethnic minority origins in Bangladesh who have migrated from their ancestral home to urban centers across Bangladesh.* The purpose of this paper is to focus specifically on the cultural dimensions of the notion of ethnic identity and how and to what extent students belonging to ethnic minority groups in Bangladesh adjust and maintain their ethnic identities in an altered environment when they migrate. It needs to be mentioned here that rigorous investigation of the restructuring of ethnic identity in the context of contemporary politics of ethnic identity and historical, socio-economic and political oppression of the ethnic minorities by Bangladesh government, armed forces and Bengali community was beyond the scope of this particular paper.

3. Methodology

An ethnographic approach was employed, based on key informant interviews (N= 20) and Focus Group Discussions (N= 80 participants) to collect qualitative information from students of ethnic minority origin who have migrated from their ancestral land to different urban centres in Bangladesh. In order to elicit different perspectives and enable data triangulation a combination of individual interviews and focus groups has been used (Guest et al., 2012). The entire fieldwork for this study was conducted between December 2017 and September 2018 by the author, aided by 8 research assistants from both Bengali (N= 5) and ethnic minority groups (N= 3). Due to time scheduling and logistic issues of fieldwork, all the focus groups were conducted on the second Friday of each month during the fieldwork (December 2017 to September 2018), followed by 2 individual key informant interviews on the next day (Saturday).

Although all research assistants have prior experience of collecting ethnographic information, author arranged numerous meetings with the research assistants throughout the

entire data collection process to ensure all research assistants are fully aware of the objectives of the study and key principles of conducting ethnographic research. Data was collected from students of 8 different ethnic groups (Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Pankhoa, Tanchangya, Santal, Garo, Hajong) living in 5 urban centres (Dhaka, Chittagong, Rangpur, Sylhet and Mymensingh) in Bangladesh. Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Pankhoa and Tanchangya ethnic groups are from CHT region while the rest of the ethnic groups are from other parts of Bangladesh. It needs to be mentioned that ethnic migrant students from both public and private universities located in 5 different urban areas (Dhaka, Chittagong, Rangpur, Sylhet and Mymensingh) in Bangladesh were included in the study.

8 participants were deliberately included per focus group session as research shows that this was large enough ensuring that a range of opinions and experiences were discussed, but small enough to enable everyone to participate and keep discussion on track (Guest et al., 2012). Focus groups were being conducted by the author as the focus group moderator and research assistants as assistants. Theoretical purposive sampling, as is standard in this kind of qualitative research was used to gain a range of perspectives from students of different ethnic groups (Guest et al., 2012). Two individuals were selected from each focus group for individual key-informant interviews. Individuals who were more engaged and active in the group discussions and who seemed more resourceful and enthusiastic about sharing their perceptions and experience were systematically selected by the author and research assistants for the key-informant interviews. A digital recorder was used during interviews and focus group sessions (with participants' knowledge and consent), to ensure maximum data capture while leaving the author and research assistants free to concentrate on recording non-verbal communication and manage the discussion effectively (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured in nature and were conducted by the author and research assistants, using pre-formulated topic guides. Topic guides were prepared keeping in mind the study objectives, and contained of a list of relevant topics (unlike pre-worded questions in a fixed order used in survey research), with a view to engage participants in discussion relevant to them and encourage them to 'express themselves in their own terms and at their own pace' (Bernard, 2017, pp. 211). Research assistants and author transcribed the audio recordings of the individual key-informant interviews and focus groups.

Grounded theory can be described as a research approach in which the theory is developed from the data, rather than the other way around. According to Charmaz (2008),

grounded theory refers to a set of systematic inductive methods for conducting qualitative research aimed toward theory development. Unlike hypothesis led deductive quantitative approaches, grounded theory approach is exploratory in nature where interpretation of data leads to formulation of theories. As an exploratory method, grounded theory is particularly well suited for investigating social processes that have attracted little prior research attention, where the previous research is lacking in breadth and/or depth (Engward, 2013). Principles of grounded theory were followed during data analysis as little prior research is available on the exact study topic. All the transcripts and accompanying field-notes were read and re-read closely by the author, to identify emergent themes, concepts and patterns.

Ethical standards were maintained rigorously throughout the entire study. In addition to obtaining informed consent, sufficient information about the research was disseminated to all study participants. Information collected during fieldwork has been anonymised before conducting data analysis and documentation to protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality. During the entire research process, author and research assistants made sure that participants would not get adversely affected (directly or indirectly) due to their participation in this research.

The author and research assistants sought to ensure that all the key topics were covered, without imposing a rigid sequence that may affected the natural flow of the conversation. The topic guide for the focus groups was shorter than that for the individual interviews, to allow sufficient time for debate and discussion among participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). To minimise power/status differentials within focus groups, all participants and the researchers sat on the floor in a circle. Each focus group lasted approximately 45-60 minutes, while semi-structured and key informant interview were generally 30-40 minutes long. During the whole fieldwork period, the author and research assistants kept detailed field notes, relating both to the interviews and focus groups through systematic observation. These notes served a dual role: they formed part of the body of data generated; they also helped the author reflect on important themes arising from interviews and focus groups, which were used to inform subsequent fieldwork. This iterative process, whereby data analysis feeds into data collection and vice versa, is at the core of a grounded theory approach (Engward, 2013).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Ethnic Identity is not Static; rather it is Complex and Dynamic

Human beings have not only been categorizing the natural world around them but also the social world for a long period of time. Scholars have argued that this tendency to classify may be regarded as an inherent characteristic of human beings (Brown, 2010). As a result, different categorizations have been emerged and evolved that classify individuals. Ethnicity, one of these categories, refers to a categorization where an ethnic group may define themselves as different from other groups because of their distinct language, religion, geography, history and ancestry. In a nutshell, ethnicity is a category which is based on cultural traits; therefore, ethnic groups are formed around virtually the same features as cultures: common beliefs, values, customs, history, and the like (Kottak, 2011). *Ethnicity entails identification with a given ethnic group, but it also involves the maintenance of a distinction from other groups* (Kottak, 2011). Based on the above mentioned discussion, the concept of ethnicity may seem like a simple one but in reality the concept may appear quite complex. Ethnic identity is often directly or indirectly linked to socio-cultural, economic and political status and an individual's ethnic identity may change depending on the context. This process of adjusting or switching one's identity in reaction to different social contexts is called the situational negotiation of identity (Gezen & Kottak, 2014).

All participants stated that their distinct ethnic identities are very important to them and they take pride in their group membership. As one Marma student stated, "I am a Marma and I come from Banderban area in CHT region. I am really proud of the fact that I am a Marma. We have a rich cultural heritage and I am proud of that". On a similar note, a Hajong student mentioned:

I come from Hajong ethnic group. My ancestral home is in Netrokona district. I have migrated to Dhaka for higher education. I have been living in Dhaka for few years and I have many Bengali friends. But if anyone asks me what is the most important aspect of my identity I would say that I am a Hajong and my ancestral home is in Netrokona, and these are the two most important parts of my identity. I consider my ethnic origin very important and I take pride in it as I believe that we have a rich history and culture.

Bangladesh has numerous ethnic minority groups (non- Bengali) where some of these groups are based in CHT region and some are from other parts of the country. As mentioned above, all ethnic students identified their group memberships to distinct ethnic groups as the

most important aspect of their ethnic identity. While talking about their daily life struggles in the altered environment after migration, most ethnic students talked about their personal struggles against adversities in the host environment with reference to prejudice and discrimination. However, it is very important to note here that during data collection whenever issues (both historical and contemporary) affecting all ethnic minority groups (indigenous as claimed by themselves) came up, students who predominantly identified themselves based on their own distinct ethnic identity, started to talk and behave in a certain way which seemed to dissolve the inter-ethnic boundaries among themselves and created a rather homogenous identity primarily arising from their minority status and their claimed status of “indigenous people” as opposed to the dominant Bengali ethnic identity. As one Tripura student stated:

Although there are few exceptions, majority of the individuals of the dominant Bengali group do not know how to respect people from minority cultures. When I first came to Chittagong, even my fellow Bengali classmates used to make offensive jokes about my facial features. They used to call me “chang”, “chung”, “chinku”, “china” etc. because of my mongoloid physical features which are different from physical features of the Bengali community. They were also making harsh stereotypical comments regarding ethnic food habit – indicating that we the ethnic minority people only eat snakes, frogs, wild boars and home-made wine.

Echoing with that a Pankhoa student mentioned:

Most Bengali people discriminate us- the ethnic minority people. When I go to any tea-stall or restaurant, sometimes I feel that the staff give more importance to other Bengali customers and ignore us. Sometimes we have to wait longer to get our food and drinks. While waiting people around us often talk rudely about us – sometimes they do it discreetly but some other occasions they just do it straight on our face without considering how we would feel about their rude behaviour. Once, I was waiting for a cup of tea in a tea-stall and the Bengali people were loudly making offensive comments – mentioning harsh words such as ‘savage’, ‘jungle habitants’ and ‘wild-people’. They were also saying how urban centers in Bangladesh were already too crowded and there was no extra space especially for savage people from the jungle.

While talking about incidents of violence over land disputes between Bengali community and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh, a Santal student stated:

All the ethnic minority groups living in Bangladesh have historically and currently been dominated and oppressed by the dominant Bengali group through civil administration, judiciary and also armed-force interventions. I personally think that without strong commitment from all levels of the government, judiciary, armed forces and political parties along with a changed mindset of the Bengali mass people, it is impossible to even expect that this long history of oppression of the ethnic minority groups in Bangladesh will stop in near future. Although recently there have been some incidents where individuals from the Bengali group set fire on Santal peoples' properties and raped Santal women, according to me, these are not isolated incidents; rather these events of extreme violence have been going on against the ethnic minority groups all over Bangladesh for a long period of time. As a member of Santal group when I hear that women from other ethnic groups are being raped by Bengalis or murders of other ethnic minority groups have taken place at the hands of Bengalis aided by the armed forces and local level government officials, I feel that members of my own community are being oppressed and tortured.

In accordance with the previous statement, a Chakma student mentioned:

The constitution of Bangladesh does not acknowledge the rights of ethnic minority people let alone their indigenous status. All governments of Bangladesh, does not matter which political parties formed that government, deliberately made efforts to dismiss 'our' claim to attain indigenous status. Here by 'our', I mean all the ethnic minority communities of Bangladesh, not just Chakma people but other ethnic groups residing in CHT and other ethnic groups residing in the plain lands of the country. How can we attain proper justice and secure our rights as indigenous people when the constitution, government, armed forces, main political parties and mass of the Bengali population do not endorse it?

Aligned with the previous account of the Chakma students, a Tangchangya student mentioned:

It is like an open-secret. You know- everyone knows very well that criminal activities committed by the Bengalis against the ethnic minorities will go unpunished. If there is no punishment and rule of law, this oppression against us – the ethnic minority communities will never stop. This is not just a special case for my group (Tangchangya) but the same things are happening to all ethnic minority groups in Bangladesh. We are minorities in two-ways: firstly, we are non-Bengalis and secondly, we are non-Muslims. This is like a

double burden. Although Bengali non-Muslims are also minorities in Bangladesh, I think they are in a better situation than us because they at least have one common factor with the dominant Bengali Muslim population which is they are both Bengali”.

Based on the discussion mentioned above it is clearly evident that ethnic identity is an important aspect of the overall identity of the ethnic migrant students but the notion of ethnic identity is not static; rather it is complex and dynamic where migrant students of ethnic minority background reconstruct and maintain their evolving ethnic identities based on varying contexts. Identities are not only created and maintained by the individuals themselves but also by other people they encounter on a regular basis (Podhovnik, 2015). For example, on numerous occasions, it has been found that to any ethnic student, his/ her identity as a member of his/ her distinct ethnic group is very important. But when issues affecting the entire ethnic minority communities of Bangladesh came up during data collection, all participants irrespective of their ethnic group replaced their emphasis on their individual ethnic identity with their identity as a member of the entire ethnic minority communities (or indigenous as claimed by themselves) of Bangladesh. Therefore, the concept of situational negotiation of identity (Gezen & Kottak, 2014) is relevant in the study context where ethnic students in the urban environment are continuously adjusting their ethnic identities in reaction to different social contexts.

4.2 Higher Levels of Previous Ethnic Involvement help Ethnic Migrant Students to better maintain their Ethnic Identities

In accordance with Ethier and Deaux (1994), *study findings suggest that ethnic students with higher levels of ethnic involvement prior to migration better maintain their ethnic identity* by linking their ethnic identity with people and activities in the new environment that support their self-identification and group involvement compared to students with less previous group involvement. During key informant interviews and focus group discussions, open-ended questions followed by appropriate probing questions were posed to understand the extent of participants' involvement with their family, friends and ethnic culture. These questions encapsulated topics such as: parents' birthplaces, language spoken at home, language of books, movies and TV shows being watched, types of food eaten before and after migration, friends from same ethnic group before and after migration, level of students' engagement in cultural and other extra-curricular activities related to their ethnic group in university. In this regard, one Marma student mentioned:

I am an active member of many clubs in my university that are associated with a diverse list of different extra-curricular activities. I played an instrumental role in organizing the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples which was a big and successful event. It was held in the central auditorium of my university and the auditorium is only exclusively used for big and important events. I also work in the departmental office. Even before migrating to Dhaka I have always participated in cultural and other activities related to my ethnic group. Some of the activities were institutional in nature, like organizing a formal event showcasing my ethnic group's cultural tradition and heritage. Some of the activities were less formal, such as organizing a small informal meeting involving both ethnic students and Bengali students where the purpose was to eradicate common misconceptions and to raise cross-cultural appreciation.

In contrast to the previous account, a Chakma student mentioned, "I really miss home, especially the food and my family and friends. I often get sick. I do not like it here. People are rude and different. Before migrating, I neither had many friends in my ancestral village nor was I involved in activities related to my ethnic group". In response to the question: "Why don't you get involved in activities in your university that are linked to your ethnic culture? Because it may make you feel less home-sick", he replied, "I just don't like the overall environment here. I often miss classes as I don't sleep well at night and sometimes I just count days and wait eagerly for the next semester break." It is important to mention here that these two students live together and go to the same university. Moreover, they went to the same boarding school before migrating to the urban hub in plain land Bangladesh. By revealing the importance of agentic (individual drive) forces, this finding contradicts with social identity theory which has traditionally undermined individual's agency and emphasized more on the common group response to altered environment. Tajfel (2010), Turner (1987) and other scholars have contributed significantly to the development of the social identity theory that places importance on the importance of collective group membership and its influence on behaviour.

4.3 Simultaneous Retention of both Old and New Social Support Networks

Scholars have argued that social identity as exhibited through collective memberships should not be conceptualized as a mere cognitive categorization process; rather social identities such as ethnic identities are created, supported and maintained by a network of social relationships (Abrams, 1992). According to Hormuth (1990), during times of transition such as migration, the relationships between an individual and his or her environment change and that

individual has to acclimatize to the altered environment. Since ethnic identity is formulated, supported and maintained by a network of relationships, it can be reasonably argued that a change in context (both physical and socio-cultural) will have important impact on ethnic identity. In the context of this study, this is also relevant as almost all the study participants have directly or indirectly mentioned that due to internal migration from their ancestral land to urban centers in Bangladesh, strategies related to the reconstruction and maintenance of their ethnic identities have evolved over time based on varying social contexts. However, previous scholars have argued that the strategies through which individuals formulate and maintain their ethnic identities in their natural environment previously are no longer valid in the altered environment and therefore, after migration they create new social supports in the new environment. Previous studies have empirically shown that migrant university students of ethnic minority origins with higher previous ethnic involvement completely replace their previous social support network by creating a new social support system in the new environment (Ethier & Deaux, 1994). In contrast to that, *ethnographic findings from this study indicate that study participants simultaneously retained and accessed both their old and new social support networks depending on situational demands and opportunities*. One Tripura student stated:

I study in a government university and there is a special quota for ethnic minority students in the government universities and organizations in Bangladesh. But sometimes without an appropriate reference it is hard to get an accommodation in the university dormitories as there are always limited seats. When I was living in my ancestral area, I got introduced to few local political leaders from both ethnic minority origins and Bengali origin during organizing different cultural events. I contacted those political leaders when I could not get a seat in the university dormitory. They looked into the matter and somehow managed to arrange a seat for me in the dormitory. Although here I have gradually made new friends from both Bengali and ethnic groups I still maintain personal and professional contact with people back home. Because you know - life is so uncertain that sometimes things may occur that are beyond your imagination so it is better to keep in touch with all types of people as you never know who might be able to help you in an emergency. These days due to social media and high speed internet connection, it is very easy to keep in touch with people even if they do not live in the same area.

In accordance with the previous account, one Garo student mentioned:

Before migration to Mymensingh, I was actively participating in various types of cultural activities of my ethnic group and was a member of different local organizations in my ancestral land. I consider myself as privileged as I am studying in a government university in Mymensingh where many Garo youth in the villages do not have access to basic education due to many reasons. I always wanted to do something that would have a positive impact on my community at large. Recently, I have started a fund-raising campaign. I want to create a small library in my community where I would also like to install few computers so that youth in my ancestral village can have access to books and basic computer literacy which may help them in future. Some of my friends and cousins back home, who did not migrate to an urban area like me, will help me in this project. I have also made new friends in university and they all have helped me tremendously in the fund raising campaign. I know that if I do not maintain my old and new social networks simultaneously, I will not be able to fulfill my dreams of contributing something good to my village that is why I try to make a balance between both these two support system.

4.4 Negative Perception about one's own Ethnic group Lowers Self-Esteem

Study findings also indicate that ethnic students who felt negatively about their ethnic group in the new environment showed lower self-esteem and increased alienation from their ethnic group. During data collection open-ended questions followed by appropriate probing questions were asked to gain an in-depth understand of the students' meaning of being a member of their distinct ethnic group, perception of threat in the new environment and self-esteem. One Hajong student stated:

I feel proud to be a Hajong. I am proud about the history and culture of our ethnic group. I never feel ashamed of my ethnic identity. I am involved in many activities related to our ethnic culture at university because I want to clarify common misunderstandings between ethnic minorities and Bengali community. Although initially after migration I faced different types of adversities, I never really felt that my ethnic identity is incompatible with the new environment. I am always eager to meet new people and learn different things from them. I think I should make the most of my time in the city and expose myself to new experiences. I want to explore the culture in the new environment which I think will be beneficial to me in future. It is not just the academic experience, you know. It is more than that.

In contrast, one Chakma student mentioned:

I feel that most people from the dominant Bengali group are always looking down on me because I am a Chakma. I am neither a Bengali nor a Muslim. I just go to the classes and then come to my dormitory. I don't feel comfortable talking to my Bengali classmates at university about my family and culture because I know even if out of sheer modesty they would not say or do something rude on my face; still deep down inside they will always have prejudice against people like me.

In accordance with the claim that ethnic migrant students who feel negatively about their ethnic group identification showed lower self-esteem and increased alienation from their ethnic group, one Santal student stated:

To be honest I actually do not feel comfortable with my ethnic identity in this new environment. I have never been much involved in activities related to my ethnic group before migrating to the city as my parents are government officials and the place where they had been posted did not have many people from my own ethnic group. Initially after migration I used to spend time with few other students from my own ethnic group but due to numerous incidents I started to avoid their company. Because I think I will be subjected to more prejudice and discrimination if I spend time with them. I also don't have many Bengali friends. I just spend time on my own- playing video and online games, watching YouTube and movies.

5. Conclusion

The ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh are a marginal group in the context of their historic and contemporary deprivation. *Due to a complex web of different inter-connected factors, significant numbers of ethnic minority individuals are now leaving their ancestral homes and migrating to different urban areas of the country which is going through rapid urbanization.* A significant portion of these ethnic migrants are students. *This study sought to explore the myriad features of the daily-life circumstances encountered by these ethnic migrant students, especially with reference to ethnic identities in the new altered environment.*

It is clearly evident based on the ethnographic evidence from this study that *the concept of ethnic identity is not simple, linear and static; rather it is a complex, multifaceted and dynamic process* through which in response to varying socio-cultural contexts, ethnic migrant students renegotiate and maintain their ethnic identities on a regular basis. Although previous

scholars have primarily emphasized on the importance of structural (physical and social) factors over agentic forces, *this study reveals that common group response to an altered environment is not prevalent; rather individuals from same the ethnic group may have different ways of re-conceptualizing and sustaining their ethnic identities based on their previous ethnic involvement.* In contrast to previous studies, this study also suggests that *ethnic migrant students with higher previous group involvement simultaneously maintain both their old and new social network in order to best meet situational demands and opportunities.* Study findings also suggest that perceived threats to ethnic group identification in the altered environment reduce self-esteem and increase alienation from ethnic group.

Future long-term ethnographic research needs to be conducted in order to unveil the potential complexities encompassing issues such as: inter and intra ethnic group variations with reference to renegotiation and maintenance of ethnic identity, group involvement and self-esteem especially in the context of contemporary identity politics and the politics of indigeneity. *A cross-cultural ethnographic comparison between ethnic migrant students from the plain land and CHT region needs to be conducted regarding renegotiation and maintenance of ethnic identity, group involvement and self-esteem in altered environment because of the varying historical, socio-cultural, economic and political contexts between ethnic minorities from plain land and CHT region in Bangladesh.* This study only focused on ethnic migrant students and future research needs to include other occupational groups of ethnic minority origins who have internally migrated within Bangladesh.

6. Recommendations

Policy makers need to employ effective strategies to facilitate activities and events that enhance ethnic group involvement among ethnic youth across Bangladesh. Because based on the study findings, it is plausible to expect that higher levels of prior ethnic group involvement may lead to better adaptation of ethnic migrant students in the altered environment. Moreover, university authorities and local government need to take effective measures such as awareness building programs to demystify common stereotypical misunderstandings prevailing between ethnic minorities and Bengali community and to increase cross-cultural appreciation. *University authorities must also take immediate action to create a safer environment for the ethnic migrant students which may in turn decrease their perceived and experienced threats to ethnic identity*

and enable ethnic migrant students to live with dignity and higher levels of self-esteem (Rotimi, 2016).

7. Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to the research assistants from both ethnic minority groups and Bengali community, who played an instrumental role in this ethnographic research. He is also indebted to all the study participants for giving their precious time and valuable information.

8. Conflict of Interest

The author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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