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4. BEING AND SEEING CHAKMA

Constructing Self and Other through Images

And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.

East Coker, Four Quartets. (T. S. Eliot, 1940)

The increased politicisation of the question of ‘who is Indigenous’ can be seen as a result of success in the attainment of legal recognition – often through international laws – of Indigenous peoples around the world. Consequently, international organisations, host states, non-governmental organisations and researchers have each attempted to develop their own definitional standards of native peoples over the last five decades, although, as Corntassel (2003) points out, this is best answered by Indigenous communities themselves. This chapter does not aim to add to this debate; nor does it attempt to reproblematicise the definitions. Rather it looks at how “invisible social realities” (Stanley, this volume, p. 4) have been exposed through images drawn by children across ethnicities.

Bangladesh has been labelled as one of the world’s most “uniquely homogeneous” (Ahsan & Chakma, 1989, p. 960) states with “no ethnic conflict” (Hussain, 2000, in Barua, p. 60) – claims predicated on statistical facts such as 99% of the population speaking Bengali and identifying as Bengali, and 85% of the people professing Islam as their religion. Over the years such convenient generalisations have legitimised the persistent cultural homogenisation that has been enacted in the country through state machineries and, with that, the suppression of ethnic minorities.

However, there are at least 45 ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh. The Chakma represent the largest of these. Commonly referred to as pahari (hill people), the adivasi (Indigenous) or the jumma (those who subsist on swidden cultivation), the Chakma are of Sino-Tibetan and Mongoloid descent and share linguistic, racial and ethnic ties with South East Asia and the hill peoples of Assam of North East India, Thailand and Upper Myanmar. They are conspicuously distinct from mainstream Bengalis in terms of clothing, language, food habits, religion, beliefs and rituals, mode of cultivation as well as sociocultural structures and political and economic practices. The Chakma for example primarily subsist on slash and burn
... jum (swidden) cultivation as opposed to ploughed cultivation characteristic of the rest of the country.

The Chakma, who claim descent from the Shakya Buddhist line of Gautama Buddha, have lived in Bangladesh for many centuries alongside both medieval Muslim imperialists and later British colonialists retaining distinct sociocultural norms. Ethnically they represent a “continuum” placed in between the two “cultural models” (van Schendel, 1992, p. 117) of the South-Asian and the Southeast Asian or, according to Chakma (2010, p. 283) the “confluence of two regions”. Today Chakma identity is firmly established in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh where they have sought to develop an Indigenous model of state, society and culture (van Schendel, 1995, in Damodaran, 2006).

The CHT represents a distinctive identity in terms of geography, racial distribution as well as cultural and political history. It comprises of an area of 12,181 square kilometres of a geographically isolated region which topographically contrasts with the rest of the plain land of Bangladesh. For two centuries the CHT was a remote hinterland of colonial rulers and then a part of the post-colonial state of Pakistan, and is currently within the state of Bangladesh inhabited by these minorities who constitute less than one per cent of the country’s population.

However, aside from representing a region of rich ethnic diversity, CHT also marks a historical setting of significant ethnic conflict (Uddin, 2010, p. 283). Despite their cultural and linguistic diversity, there has been a “systematic reluctance” to recognise the “plural and heterogeneous nature” of the ethnic minorities within modern Bangladesh’s legal-constitutional framework (Adnan, 2008, p. 27). Uddin (2010) has documented the historical marginalisation of ethnic minorities based on the binary of upland-lowland relations in Bangladesh and the tensions which characterise the division between ethnic minorities living in hilly areas and the plain land Bengalis who regulate state institutions.

Other academic scholarship has documented significant research on the historical, political and ethnographic accounts of the CHT in general and the Chakma in particular (see for example: Ahsan & Chakma, 1989; Bhaumik, 1997; Chakma, B., 1997; Chakma, S., 2000; Guhathakurta, 1997; Mohsin, 1997a, 1997b, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; van Schendel, 1992), especially focussing on their political strife, language, history and culture. Little research to date has examined the changing mental landscape of the region through the lens of children’s eyes, and in particular their views manifested in drawings, or what we can call ‘visual narratives’ (Bach, 2007). These private and individual narratives provide rich and complex stories of identification and self-identification through the naïve, spontaneous and unstudied eyes of children who are largely uninformed of the discursive constructions of themselves and others as enacted in academic scholarship.