Chapter 2
General Context of the Research
2 General Context of the Research

"First of all we want to talk about our identity. We are Bengali citizens but we are not members of the Bengali nation. If you look at our face you will understand that there are some physical differences between Bengali people and us. Our skin is darker, our lips are thicker and our nose is flatter than yours and we have a different language. Our dances and songs are also different from the Bengali ones. In any of our social occasions we need beer which is prepared by us and we also eat some food which you don't like. We have been living together with the Bengali people for long time and nevertheless we have been conserving our customs and culture and we will try to keep it in our heart and soul."¹

2.1 Tribal Castes, Adivasi, Hillman: how to define Indigenous People in Bangladesh?

Giving a unique definition of Indigenous People is a hard task which is not included in the aims of this paper. Usually, anthropological usage of the term “indigenous” refers to the early or even first settlers of a given territory. This usage corresponds to the one found in international human rights law. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues says, “there does not seem to be one definitive definition of indigenous people, but generally indigenous people are those that have historically belonged to a particular region or country, before its colonization or transformation into a nation state, and may have different—often unique—cultural, linguistic, traditional, and other characteristics to those of the dominant culture of that region or state.”² Thus, a part from the actual or previous association with a territory, it should be also taken into account the existence of a collective name, a myth of descent, a shared history and distinct cultural traits.

¹ Speech given by a representative of Adivasi Munda Unnayon Shangoton in Tala, on the 9th of August 2010, International Indigenous Day.
² Discourses on Policy Perspectives on Land Rights and Adibashis of the Plains of northwest Bangladesh, by Gina Dizon, Published by VSOB, 2008
The ILO Indigenous and Tribal People 169 Convention, Article No 1 applies to:
“(a) tribal people in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distin-
guish them from other sections of the national community, and whose status is regulated wholly
or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations;
(b) people in independent countries who are regarded as indigenous on account of their descent
from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country
belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization or the establishment of present state boundaries
and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural
and political institutions.”
Thus, considering the diversity of indigenous people, the general academic and international law
understanding of this term is based on the following principles:
1 self-identification as indigenous people at the individual level and accepted by the community
as their member;  
2 historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies.

Even trickier is to get a unique definition of Indigenous People in Bangladesh. In this culturally,
religiously and linguistically diverse country, there is a variability of terms according to the everyday
language used by the common people, the self perception of ethnic groups, the general
literature, the media and the official government documents.
If we consider those people whose linguistic and cultural background is different from that of the
mainstream population of Bangladesh, they are usually commonly referred to as “Tribals” (in Bangla language Upajati) but the people belonging to ethnic groups often do not like the use of those terms to refer to them, on account of its pejorative connotations, being associated with “primitive,” “backward” and so forth. At the same time, indigenous groups in Chittagong Hill tracks are often defined as Pahari, hill people.
Since 1992, when the International Year of the Indigenous People was declared by the United Nations, more and more indigenous people, both from the hills and the plains have started to increasingly refer to themselves as indigenous in English, and as Adivasi in the national language. But according to some authors also the use of those terms is confusing, particularly in those cases where it is hard to establish whether the group in question is the indigenous people of the area they inhabit or they migrated to that area from somewhere else (Khalique K. in; Gain P. et alii, 1995: 3).
As a result of the described fuzzy scenario, today the terms “Ethnic minority”, “Adivasi”, and “tribal” are used interchangeably within documents and literature in Bangladesh.

2.2. The legislative frame about Adivasis and Indigenous Knowledge

If we have a glance at the national official documents and law texts looking for a clearer approach we won’t find any: government perspectives on the issue are varied too.
“in the Constitution of Bangladesh everybody is equal in front of the law, there is no mention of indigenous people, there are only backward sections of the society. The way usually indigenous are officially mentioned
by government acts is Upajati, Tribal\(^5\). The East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 ("EBSAT ACT, 1950") uses the terms *aboriginal tribes and castes* to refer to the Adivasis of the plains\(^5\). The CHT Regulation of 1900 uses the term *Hillman* to refer to the adivasis of the CHT. Similar wording has been used in the national Budget Act of 1995 (Act 12 of 1995)\(^7\).

In the National Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper adopted by the Government of Bangladesh in 2005, the term “Adivasi/ethnic minorities” was used. In recent years, this was the first time that Bengali equivalent of indigenous or aboriginal appeared in a formal government document. In the PRSP-II, adopted in October 2008, the terms “Indigenous communities” and “indigenous people” were both used\(^8\).

On the other hand, Bangladesh is signatory to the 1957 ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Populations, but refused to sign the 1989 ILO Convention NO.169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal People in Independent Countries. Moreover, the position of the Bangladesh government delegation at the UN Working Group on the Draft Declaration of Indigenous People (WGPD) in 2006, says, “The government of Bangladesh supports the Draft in its present form. However it will not be applicable in Bangladesh as there are no indigenous people in the country” (The Independent, November 24, 2006). The recent position of Bangladesh government abstaining from the UN Declaration on Indigenous People’s Rights aligns its earlier position to the Bangladesh government’s report submitted to the UN Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination in May 2000 which categorically denied the distinct identity of Indigenous People. The report reads: “Bangladesh’s geographical location and history have made it a home to people of diverse origins, races, colors, and descent. The assimilative character of Bengal civilization combined with the intermingling of inhabitants has resulted in a composite society which has racially and culturally turned into a melting pot over the millennia”\(^9\).

Eventually, the law no. 23, emitted on 12 of April 2010 introduced a new nomenclature, using the new definition “small anthropological group” (*kudro nri-ghosti*) including in this definition 27 groups.

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5 Mr Sanjeeb Drong, Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, personal conversation.
6 This act forbids the transfer of lands by ‘aboriginal’ to non aboriginal person without the expressed consent of the Government’s District Officer.
7 http://srpbypsl.blogspot.com/2010/06/advasis-rights-in-bangladesh-where-have.html
8 Cfr Roy R. D., 2006:7
9 Source: Discourses on Policy Perspectives on Land Rights and Adibasis of the Plains of northwest Bangladesh, by Gina Dizon, Published by VSOI, 2008
Considering the specific issue of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge, "Although there has been cursory mention in the Constitution of Bangladesh regarding the need for conservation of cultural heritage, detailed governmental programmatic action and practical strategy are still to come" (Khan, Sukanta 2000: 18).

Bangladesh has signed in 1992 and ratified in 1994 the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (Rio de Janeiro 1992), whose main goals are the conservation of biodiversity and the sustainable use of its components. The article 10c of the mentioned convention encourages States "as far as possible and as appropriate: to protect and encourage customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices that are compatible with conservation or sustainable use requirements".

"This article may provide a strong basis for recognition of the connection between local and indigenous communities and conservation and uses of biological resources. [...] The Convention on Biological Diversity Secretariat has thus recommended that in order to comply with their obligations under this article, States must ensure that national legislation and national policies take into account and recognize, among others, indigenous legal systems, corresponding systems of governance and administration, land and water rights and control over sacred and cultural sites." (Unnayon Onneshan 2007:2).

A very interesting text is the "Biodiversity and Community Knowledge Protection Act", which was drafted in 1997 and presented at the UNCTAD Expert Meeting on Systems and National Experiences in Geneva in 2000 by the Bangladesh Agriculture Research Council (BARC). Its main objective is “protecting the sovereign rights of the Communities that have knowledge of biodiversity, and have managed, maintained, conserved, reproduced and enhanced biodiversity, genetic resources and traditional knowledge, culture and various forms of practice related to these resources and to create the legal and institutional environment”\textsuperscript{10}, but no real binding legal document based on this draft has been emitted so far.


\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{picture2.3.jpg}
\caption{Munda house in Kashipur}
\end{figure}
2.3. Number and location of ethnic communities in Bangladesh

"The Bengalee population as a whole had till recently been largely unaware of the tribal question. The dismally poor illiterate agrarian Bengalee population, beset with its own problems of making both hands meet, has little opportunity or time to know about the problems of others. This is also true about the mutually insulated classes or communities among the Bengalees themselves separated by religion, sect, caste or professions. Among the many disadvantaged classes and groups of people the tribal are just another category and the process of exploitation and deprivation is pretty much the same in all cases following from the 'system' or structure of society. [...] There is ignorance even about the correct number of tribal population." (Mahmud Shah Qureshi, 1984:369)

To obtain realistic estimates of the total number of Indigenous People in Bangladesh is quite utopian, considering that the 2001 national census did not include any space or column in the form for collecting data on indigenous issues. The 1991 census did collect data on Adivasi people and gave the total population as approximately 1.2 million 11. On the other hand, some documents suggest that the minority ethnic groups make up approximately the 2 percent of the total population of the country 12.

The accuracy of the total calculated in the 1991 census is questioned by many sources as registration differentiated on the basis of religion instead of ethnic status, so Christian or Hindus indigenous people were registered as Christian or Hindu and only the Adivasis claiming to adhere to the indigenous religious were merged in the unspcific category “other”. Moreover, in the 1991 census only 27 groups were identified: as we have seen, the same number is indicated in the act of 12 April 2010, whilst according to Qureshi (ibidem) the ethnic communities are 29.

With regards to the representative of Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, Mr. Sanjeeb Drong, he states that the number of Adivasi groups in the country is around 44, and another text affirms that there are “more than 45 unique and rich ethnic groups of which Bengalis are the largest” 13.

These are just examples of how the number of ethnic communities can present a wide variation according to the source, due to several reasons. For example some statistics list the same group as two separate ethnic communities, where the same ethnic community is known by different names or is divided in subgroups confused as principal 14; the value changes as well according to the chosen definition of what an ethnic group is (should Bangla population be counted in or not? Are Adivasis that became Christians still Adivasis?). Another source of incertitude is the fact that an increasing number of low caste and socially marginalized groups has started to identify themselves as indigenous 15. Some people could blame that this is just as way to get rid of Hindu caste discrimination or to attract more attention and funds than the “other undistinguished poor people”, but we should keep in mind that “the problem in Bangladesh is not so much one of pretenders seeking indigenous status, but more one of denial of identity and rights of genuine indigenous people” (Roy R.D., 2006:8).

Generally it is written that most indigenous people live in remote areas of Bangladesh along the border regions of the country, in North Bengal (western Rajshahi Division), Greater Mymensingh (northern Dhaka Division, Greater Sylhet (northeast and southeast of Sylhet Division), and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Chittagong Division, where highest population of Adivasi people lives.

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11 According to the government statistics (in Kamal M. 2007:xvi) “the total number of Adivasis is 1,205,978.”
13 Durnavian T. 2007:.
15 In recent years, members of tea estate workers – largely descendants of migrant workers of indigenous descent from neighbouring areas of India, who remain among the most socially, economically and politically marginalized sections of Bangladeshi citizens– have also chosen to participate in forums of indigenous people” Roy R.D. 2006:8.
But we must observe that, as a consequence of the existing uncertainty about definition and number of ethnic groups in Bangladesh, the data describing their location is also vague. Especially the groups living in the South West region of the country are not well documented (and many times not even mentioned\textsuperscript{16}). As an example, here we copy one of the tables available in the literature that describes the location of Adivasi communities and we observe that the information related to the group object of our study, the Munda, is inaccurate.

Munda are correctly mentioned to live in North Bengal, while incomplete information is given about the groups actually living in the South-West part of the country. We find the unclear denomination “Bagdi (Buno)” which is quite confusing, where Bagdi is an indigenous group often confused with a low caste (for many local people today the word Bagdi simply means “fisherman”) and Buno is not even the name of an ethnic group, but a pejorative term by which Munda are often referred as by Bangladeshis (“the word Buno stands for uncivilized, jungly, barbarian, savage: is this word fit for us?”\textsuperscript{17}). Moreover in the table there is no mention to other ethnic groups living in the area, the Mahato and the Oraon.

Table 2. Location of Adivasi communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Adivasi Communities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Greater Mymensingh (Mymensingh, Tangail, Netrokona, Jamalpur, Sherpur districts)</td>
<td>Garo</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hajong</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Koch</td>
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<td>Gazipur</td>
<td>Barman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coastal Area (Patuakhali, Barguna and Cox’s Bazar districts)</td>
<td>Rakhaín</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greater Sylhet (Sunamganj, Moulibazar, Sylhet, Hobiganj districts)</td>
<td>Monipuri</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khasia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Garo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong Hill Tracts (Banderban, Rangamati and Khagrachari districts)</td>
<td>Chakma</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marma</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tripura</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bawm</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Bangku</td>
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<tr>
<td>South-West (Jessore, Satkhira, Khulna districts)</td>
<td>Bagdi (Buno)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Bengal (Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Gaibandha, Nonagon, Begura, Sirajganj, Chapainawabgonj, Natore districts)</td>
<td>Santal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Oraon</td>
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<td>Munda</td>
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<td>Malo</td>
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<td>Mahali</td>
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<td>Khondo</td>
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\textsuperscript{16} See Gain P. 2005:3 and 2008:75.

\textsuperscript{17} Speech given by a representative of Adlbasi Munda Unnayan Shangstan in Tala, on the 9th of august 2010, International Indigenous Day. More details about Buno word in Munda K. 2009, p.22.
2.4. The Sundarban Forest: blessing and curses

The Sundarban forest is the largest mangrove forest in the world and constitutes the southernmost part of the Gangetic Delta on the Bay of Bengal. It is formed by the confluence of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers across southern Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. It comprises the seasonally-flooded Sundarban freshwater swamp forests that lie inland from the mangrove forests on the coastal fringe. Mangrove forests are among the most productive ecosystems on the planet. The forests support a high diversity of marine and terrestrial life through food web interactions, and act as refuges and nursery grounds for many species of fish, shellfish and crustacean. One third of the area belongs to India, two thirds to Bangladesh. On 6 December 1997 UNESCO declared the Sundarban the 798th World Heritage Site.

"It has always been difficult to trace a real demographic data on the Sundarban as no separate population census had been taken on the area even during the British period" (A.H.M. Zehadul Karim in Khan 2000:119), thus the number of inhabitants and their composition (Bengali Hindus or Muslim, ethnic communities) is not well defined. Furthermore, even if demographic data are not certain, what is certain is that all the inhabitants of the area, no matter their religious belief, share the devotion to Bonbibi, the Goddess of the Forest.

"Sundarban's villages have both Hindus and Muslims, but in truth they are just children of the forest. The Musholmans pray five times in a mosque and the Hindus do their temple arothi, but when it is time to go to the forest, we are together in our prayers to Maa Bonbibi. The Muslims tuck their beards and sit arm in arm in front of an idol with the Hindus who have no qualms about praying to a Muslim deity. Even when riots have spread across the Bengals, the Hindus and Muslims of the Sundarbans have lived as brothers... because the forest forces us to remain human, remain humane and stay in touch with what religion was meant to be... a source of strength, a divine bond, with our Khuda, our soul and our neighbor. A night in the forest is enough to teach you that".18

Forest communities, hail Bonbibi to protect them against the weather and the attacks from the

tigers. No local people will enter in the jungle without seeking her blessing (in particular honey collectors and wood cutters are the one that more often cross the territory of the wild)\(^{19}\).

The Bangladesh part of the Sundarban is estimated to be about 2316 square miles (GPRB, 1978), of which about one fourth is occupied by water bodies in the forms of river, canals and creeks of width varying from a few meters to several kilometers. The interconnected network of waterways makes almost every corner of the forest accessible by boat. The forest lies under four administrative ranges: Chandpait, Sarankhola, Khulna, and Burigoalini, Satkhira. As mentioned in the first chapter, the studied population of our research lives in Satkhira district. On 25 May 2009 this area was struck by Cyclone Ayla\(^{20}\) which left thousands of people without home, farmland and domestic animals in Shymnagar, Kaligonj, Assasuni and Dakope areas, as tidal waves leaping up to 5 meters high rolled onto those coastal districts. The waves damaged river and flood-control embankments and dykes, which was not possible to repair immediately because of the monsoon. As a result, many villages remained submerged during several months and saline water continued flooding the household areas. The presence of saline water on the farming soils that were not lost made them unsuitable to grow any kind of crop, while the contamination of the pukurs (community ponds where rainwater is harvested and then used for productive and human use during the dry season) made them unusable. This problem lasted up to the current year, since before the arrival of the new monsoon in the pukurs there was still saline water\(^{21}\).

Nonetheless, in the Sundarban villages of Bangladesh the problems of saline water intrusion, changes in soil composition and pollution of water supplies were well known long before the advent of Ayla because of the progressive introduction of shrimps farming. Starting from the 1980s, large tracts of agricultural land have been taken away from farmers (in many cases with serious human rights violations\(^{22}\)) and inundated with saline water in order to create shrimp ponds. This form of aquaculture took over farmland and forest, causing direct impacts on biodiversity, crop productivity, food security, health and livelihoods of rural farming communities. The social negative impact provoked by the loss of employment in the agricultural sector\(^{23}\) and the disruption of local traditional water management practices, due to the blocked access to channels and ponds that used to be communally, have also to be mentioned.

Thus, Ayla just worsened in a drastic way a situation that was already dramatic: many local farmers are strongly aware that the damages that the cyclone provoked were so huge also because of the presence of shrimp farming. It is unequivocal that the shrimp aquaculture weakened the river embankments year by year because of digging canals and cutting mangroves: this has increased drastically the vulnerability of the Sundarban communities to tidal waves and cyclones.

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\(^{19}\) It is believed that the demon king, Dokkhin Rai (the lord of the south), an arch-enemy of Bonbibibi actually appears in the disguise of a tiger and attacks human beings. “Legends of the goddess were first mentioned by Krishnanam Das in the 17th century. Later, the tales were retold in late 19th century in the Bonbibi Jahnunam (Glory to Bonbibi) by Abdur Rahim, who wrote them in Bangla, but In the way of the Arabic script – right to left” (Ibidem). The story shows an interesting mixture of religious influences. It is Hindu by nature, but always starts with the Muslim word “Bismillah”, Archangel Gabriel plays a role, when he sends Bon Bibi and her brother from Mecca to Sundarban, to defeat the nasty god Dokkhin Rai,” www.worldcook.net/Worldtravel.../Sundarban.html

\(^{20}\) Which intensity was comparable to the cyclone SIDR, which in 2007 affected mostly other districts and damaged about a quarter of the Sundarban mangrove forest, researchers said mangrove forest Sundarban will take at least 40 years to recover itself from this catastrophe.

\(^{21}\) Non-availability of drinking water is one of the most crucial and burning problems in Dacope and Shymnagar since the natural and usual source of water supply (community ponds) is fully disrupted due to inundation by saline water” http://ccram.in.org.bd/file/pdf/34.pdf

\(^{22}\) Shady dealings and violence have surrounded the prawn business ever since it began more than two decades ago Ash L.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/4270657.stm

\(^{23}\) Sometimes microcredit is given to start up such farms. But often, better off entrepreneurs buy the land from the rice farmers. Sometimes they also lease it for small amount. They put the land under a layer of saline water, thus decreasing the rice harvest for the neighboring land, which gives them the opportunity to buy this land cheaply and extend their shrimp farm. The leased lands become unusable for any kind of agriculture, and thus lease price remains low. The income for shrimp hatching is better than from rice growing but is far less work intensive, and many people become jobless.” www.worldcook.net/Worldtravel.../Sundarban.html
Therefore, ecological and socio-economic sustainability is at stake and a whole lifestyle and livelihood based on access and exploitation of natural resources is under threat. “In the coastal mangroves of Sundarban, an estimated 1 million of Bawali (wood cutters and thatch collectors), Mouali (honey collectors), and fisherfolk communities depend on the forest resources. Depletion of forest and destruction of habitats leads towards the loss of livelihood of these poor people traditionally dependent upon forest resources. Many members of these occupational groups are also from the minority low caste Hindu population. Therefore loss of their livelihood brings forth questions of equity and human rights for such vulnerable groups” (Syed Zahir Sadeque, July 2000:15).

Picture 2.5. Shrimp fields in the surrounding of Kashipur

2.5. Relief and development intervention in Shyamnagar area

The results of the survey that was implemented among 40 local NGOs, whose headquarters are in the city of Shyamnagar, are summarized in the following tables.

Table 3. Number and location of local NGO's intervention.
Table 4. Percentage of NGOs implementing activities related to water issues.

We can observe that from the survey data collected, it was found that about 60% of the NGOs are conducting projects related to water issues. Out of those that participated in the survey, about 58% said to have indigenous people among their direct beneficiaries: out of these 58% of NGOs, about 52% mention the Munda group (Caritas, Agrogothi, Dalit, Gano Unnayan Federation, Islamic Relief Worldwide Bangladesh, JOAR, Parittran, Progoti, Rupantor, SETU Bangladesh, SODESH, Solidarite Bangladesh, SUDIPTI, SUS, Sushilan, Uttaran, Varasha).

The name of the organization are: Barcik, Concern, Gonoprogati, Agrogothi, DALIT, Gano Unnayan Federation, Islamic Relief Worldwide Bangladesh, JJS, JOAR, Leaders, Muslim AID, Nakshikatha, NGF, Pratik Trust, Progoti, Rupantor, SETU Bangladesh, SODESH, Solidarite Bangladesh, SUDIPTI, SUS, Sushilan, Uttaran, Varasha.