

INCLUSION-EXCLUSION DEBATE AND CLIMATE CHANGE: THE CASE OF RAJBANGSHI ETHNIC COMMUNITY OF BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an insight on how the politics of identity produces vulnerability for ethnic community in Bangladesh. It explores the outcomes of the social exclusion of ethnic people in terms of climate vulnerability, adaptive capacity, and successful adaptation. Aiming to provide equal opportunity, social inclusion of indigenous ethnic and scheduled caste communities in line with equal facilities to mainstream brings about crucial potentials to improve their socio-economic condition. Social exclusion lessens their capacity and resiliency associated with the amelioration of risk and vulnerability factors in terms of climate change. Rajbangshi people of Assasuni Upazila in the district Satkhira of Southwestern Bangladesh identify themselves as the distinct indigenous ethnic community. Locally they are known as scheduled caste (engaged in catching fish in the Bay of Bengal). Socially included mainstream communities have high individual, communal and institutional capacities to face climate change induced hazardous events. On the other hand, communities like Rajbangshi are more vulnerable to these events. This study found that Rajbangshi people have to pass the perilous time during cyclone, storm, thunderstorm, and lightening. The geographic location of the household makes this community more fragile to the direct heat of the storm, cyclone, salinity intrusion and flood. We know that socio-economic and institutional capacities make adaptation strategies effective. Because of their marginalized situation, these Rajbangshis have few options for successful adaption to climate impacts. Following the methods like observation, in-depth interview, key informant interview, FGD, and case study, this study urges for the inclusion of Rajbangshis in order to enhance their adaptive capacity to meet the challenges of climate change.

KEYWORDS: *Climate Change, Ethnic Community, Identity, Inclusion, Exclusion, Vulnerability*

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the impacts of climate change on and adaptation processes of the ethnic minority and scheduled caste in Bangladesh. Bangladesh Adibasi Forum (2013) has identified more than forty-five indigenous communities living in the country fostering own cultural identity distinct from the mainstream. However, these ethnic communities are sufferers of the politics of identity in various cases (Tripura n. d.). For instance, Bangladesh government does not recognize the existence of any indigenous communities in the country (Shafique 2011). Historically, rulers of the country have had invincible desire to melt all ethnic communities in line with mainstream Bengali holding a single 'Bengali' identity with the intention of skipping provisions for indigenous people (Mohsin 2000). Ethnic communities, on the other hand, protested against this kind of so-called inclusion that dispatrons their indigenous cultures and identity and

hinders multiculturalism. Thus, the politics of ethnic identity went its rigid and derogative form in the Fifteenth Reformation of Bangladesh constitution by terming indigenous people as “ethnic minority”.

Discussion on social inclusion and exclusion has received a new form in the era of global climate change when IPCC’s fourth and fifth assessment reports and Kyoto Protocol did not utter any direct word for the well-being of ethnic people in response to climate change vulnerability (IUCN 2008). Followed by worldwide proclamation of Indigenous People’s Organizations (IPOs) to include indigenous people into climate discourse, many international non-government organizations shifted their concerns to indigenous people. Thus, climate change has reached public discourse after scientists’ alarming prediction on global warming and its projected impacts (Giddens 2008). It has created its substantial concern in the human mind beyond the politics of nationalism, demarcation, and state. This concern about climate change sometimes creates bitterness between developed-undeveloped and industrialized-traditional societies.

Climate and disaster studies elaborated that marginalized communities are more vulnerable to climate change (APHA 2015). Climate change adversely affects lives and livelihoods of people who mainly depend upon natural resources for their daily subsistence (IPCC 2007). Rajbangshi community of Assasuni Upazila is directly dependent on nature and they are the most vulnerable to erratic climatic events. Bangladesh is owing to face extreme climatic factors such as drought, excessive and inadequate rainfall, salinity intrusion, flood, heat wave, nor’wester, storm, lightening, riverbank erosion, and water logging. Scientists and climate experts warn that climate change will increase the frequency and intensity of these events in near future (Riebeek 2005; Hales et al 2003). The events cause massive costs, assumed double in case of the ethnic minority, and scheduled caste people (IUCN 2008). Rajbangshis have very poor livelihood options and these are directly associated with their poor adaptive capacity to climate change. Therefore, this study focuses on to identify major problems and impediments of Rajbangshi for successful adaptation to climate change driven challenges. Some observed and presumed impacts of global climate change on the lives and livelihoods of mainstream Bengali community has been explored, but knowledge, perception, and practices (KPP) of indigenous people toward climate change has not been accounted yet. Therefore, problems, limitation, and constraints exposed by climate change on indigenous people need to be addressed immediately in order to pay attention for further research on climate change and ethnic group as well as for recommending better solutions.

STUDY OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The major objective of the study is to explore climate vulnerability and adaptive capacity of Rajbangshi community from the perspective of social inclusion and exclusion discourse. Some specific objectives are to identify adaptation strategies and explore factors associated with their climate vulnerability and adaptive capacity. Methods followed for the study include observation, in-depth interview, key informant interview, FGD, and case study to collect primary data from the field through emic perspectives. Analysis of the collected data followed a qualitative interpretive ethnographic tradition with special references to cases.

Study Place and People

Fieldwork for this study was conducted in Khajra union of Assasuni upazila in Satkhira district of Southwestern Bangladesh. Total household of Khajra union is 5743 (male 12842 and female 13204) (BBS 2011). Majority of the Rajbangshis of this union is dependent on their ancestor’s occupation of catching fish. Both male and female are involved

where the majority of the male catch fish in the sea and women do both domestic chores and catch fish or crab in the nearby rivers. The present study has found an exception of occupation in which only a man occupies subsistence through teaching in a government primary school. People of this community are usually hospitable and speak in the native language of Satkhira district with slight accentual distortion from the mainstream. Their physical appearance is like the Bangalees. This community traditionally lives in a socially demarcated territory distinct from the mainstream people of the society. Partitioned by the local Khajra bazaar Rajbangshis live on the government Khas land and they are mainly landless.

Climate Change, Rajbangshi and the Key Factors of Vulnerability

Social Exclusion and Marginalization

Rajbangshis address themselves as the indigenous group, but they are locally recognized as scheduled caste and known as *Jhele*. Ethnic minorities with bigger population size (within an ethnic minority) are entitled aid from many national and international organizations, but scheduled caste and a minority among ethnic minorities cannot avail this in many cases. Rajbangshis are socially excluded due to their voiceless position and a culturally addressed derogatory profession. They are excluded from socio-political power and cannot raise their voices for social inclusion, equality, and proper distribution of public reliefs and aids. The absence of portrayal in rustic political structure additionally results in unequal treatment by nearby administrative bodies and mainstream. Traditionally they worship *Hari* god and they do not have access to other caste's temple in the village. Ethnic people formulate adaptation strategies to the whimsical behavior of climate and weather based on their long-lasting observatory knowledge (Salick and Byg 2007). For example, while staying in the sea elderly Rajbangshi people may foresee pending tempest and its intensity by watching nearness of profound dark cloud in the sky with a twist from the east. Climate change causes changes in the historical weather cycle that creates a problem for indigenous people's weather reading and forecasting system (Crate 2011). According to Ramu (fictive name), a 50 years old man,

[...] Nor'wester used to take place from the beginning of the month *Baishakh* to the first half of Jaistha. But now-a-days it is taking place from the month *Baishakh* to *Shraban*. Therefore, it has become difficult to read the weather and predict its behavior. (Quotation is taken from case study during fieldwork in 2016)

Poverty

Poverty is a factor that makes this community more fragile to climate change. Most of the people of Rajbangshi community are poor and live below the poverty line. Their average household annual income ranges from taka 80,000-100,000 which they earn through catching fish. But the abundance of fish in the sea, river, and other water reservoir are decreasing day by day. Communities with the prospect to increase socio-economic well-being through multi-income opportunities are said to have higher capacities to meet climate challenge (IUCN 2008: 18). Insufficient income and poverty are the factors that make indigenous ethnic and scheduled caste community socio-economically vulnerable to climate stress. Overall, the agricultural production scenario of Assasuni Upazila is deteriorating due to increased salinity resulting replacement of farmable land to shrimp cultivation. This impact of climate change of salinity intrusion affects vegetable and other agro-production, which makes people subsequently dependent on imported agro-produces for daily diet. With poor earning facilities and demarcated employment, Rajbangshis have lower capabilities to buy produces from the market in contrast to mainstream Bangalee Muslim or Hindu community. Hence, poverty situation goes worse when climate-induced natural hazard and disaster take place (World Bank 2015). They have to stay in the sea for six months to

catch fish, and amount of their income subsequently falls if the storm or nor'wester intervene catching fish. According to Rajib (fictive name), a 60 years old man,

[...] In recent years storm and nor'wester is so frequently occurring. Unpredicted nor'wester seriously hampers collection of fish by turning turtle boats and injuring Rajbangshi. This intervention impacts on catching fish and results in low income. (Quotation is taken from case study during fieldwork in 2016)

Health and Nutrition: Poverty situation and predominant state of malnutrition help to increase climate vulnerability and decrease adaptive capacity compared to prosperous socio-economic and physical condition (IUCN 2008). Thus, Rajbangshis meet diet-protein from fish but the other components such as meat, vegetable, and fruits are merely available to them. A Rajbangshi household eats meat once in a month, but fruits are beyond their buying capacity. A vegetable is available in local markets but they merely buy it due to high cost. In addition, these people live within a heavy rainfall associated with congested accommodation creates water logging around houses which further promotes vector and waterborne diseases such as malaria, dengue, and diarrhea in the community. This scenario of vector and waterborne disease and assaults of harmful parasites are assumed to be increased by about 3-5% as the global temperature will increase 2-3 °C within 2050 (McMichael et al 2003). Due to the prevalence of multi-faceted poverty and social marginalization, Rajbangshi has a few access to mainstream health care service. Climate change driven inadequate rainfall for a longer period of time critically affects their health and being scheduled caste they are not allowed to use water of any ponds of the area. However, a frequent intrusion of saline water makes this community more vulnerable in terms of sanitation, drinking water, and skin diseases.

Social Network

Rajbangshi is a socially demarcated community and it does not have strong social ties with other communities which may aid during the perilous time of climate change induced natural disasters. A leader of this community Shymol (fictive name) maintains an alliance with mainstream community, but they entitle a few relief goods during a disaster. Devastating disasters such as *Sidre* (2007) and *Aila* (2009) ruined this community in several aspects, but they got only some KGs of rice from local government. No voluntary organization extended their hands after massive shocks of *Aila* due to the spatial distance from upazila town and geographic location near the riverside muddy road. People of this community usually do not attain higher education, which sometimes makes them socio-economically more vulnerable to climate change due to muteness and inability to pay attention to national/international organizations. A worldwide successful adaptation to climate change is occupational migration (Crate 2008, 2011; Salick and Byg, 2007) and this is difficult for this community. Communities with migration tendency are assumed to be more resilient to adverse climatic hazards than communities whose members have low migration attitude (IUCN 2008). A growing number of socially marginalized people of Bangladesh have been migrating to urban areas for securing socio-economic well-being, but Rajbangshis have lower migratory attitude and network even after pushed by extreme climatic events.

Resource Availability

Rajbangshi people mainly occupy subsistence fully relying on natural resources. Gradual environmental degradation by humankind influences the abundances of water resources. Community members report that sufficiency of fish in river, canal, and bay is decreasing day by day. It takes twice times and energy to get the same amount of fish now comparing to some passed decades. Besides fish, they only have access to the collection of a float firewood in the river and bay.

Residence Pattern and Quality of Housing

Intensity of climate change impacts depends on the geographic location of communities (Brooks 2003). Communities living in the vulnerable ecosystem are more predisposed to the direct impact of climate change induced hazard and disaster. One group of Rajbangshi's residence is outside of embankment and beside the river, while the other group is protected by an embankment. Thus, the first group is directly susceptible to climate change induced storm and overflow of the river and the later group is less vulnerable compared to the first. Quality to the construction of houses is crucial here. Houses of the first group are made up of locally available materials such as *Golpata* (Thatched) with the scarce exception of a tin shed. Walls are created from bamboo utensils and floors are muddy. Residence of the second portion is at the low-lying land where waterlogging is a major problem and creates severe health problems. Embankment eroded during the destructive cyclone *Aila* and the whole community inundated and resulted in massive damage of life and wealth. Maiden reason for this housing pattern is sometimes due to the availability of materials locally or for inability to use more strong utensils. If climate change intensifies destructive events in near future, houses may not have capacities to tackle these hazards, and vulnerability of Rajbangshi will go higher which may limit its capability to cope with stress.

Capacity and Impediment to Climate Change Adaptation

Adaptation, either successful or futile, has been a crucial characteristic and prerequisite of human society. Adaptation has been aiding humanity to come at the homo-sapiens stage to modern flourished brained bipedal being capable of talking about adaptation process. However, Rajbangshi community takes adaptation strategies faced by climate change induced limitation and vulnerability with available individual, social, communal, economic, and institutional capacities, and absence of these capacities is to be said their impediments to adaptation. Adaptation, capacity, and impediments of Rajbangshi to successful climate change adaptation (CCA) are elaborated in table-1.

Table 1: CCA Capacity and Impediment of Rajbangshi

Events	Adaptation	Capacity	Impediment
Flood	<p>a) Use flooded water or river water for sanitation.</p> <p>b) Drink harvested rain water or PSF (Pond, Sand Filter) water if they remain unaffected.</p> <p>c) Use boat for mobility</p> <p>d) Repair houses with local thatched.</p>	<p>a) Only flood or river water becomes available.</p> <p>b) Due to saline river water, usually, harvest rainwater in the monsoon.</p> <p>c) Fishing boat aids in the flood.</p> <p>d) Locally available.</p>	<p>a) No nearby ponds or other reservoir remain safe during flood.</p> <p>b) PSF water is not available in nearby places. NGOs constructed this filter in other communities not within Rajbangshi.</p> <p>c) Unavailability of tube well which does not inundate during the flood.</p> <p>d) Weaker capacity to build a more climate resilient house.</p>
Nor'wester/S torm	<p>a) Maintain distance from trees.</p> <p>b) Height of the houses is kept in lower altitude.</p> <p>c) Read weather and take action according to indigenous weather knowledge.</p> <p>d) Houses' height is kept lower than embankment.</p> <p>e) (While fishing) Return to coast after getting early warning system.</p>	<p>b) Requires fewer materials.</p> <p>c) Sufficient observatory Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).</p> <p>d) A high embankment has been constructed.</p> <p>e) Information availability</p>	<p>b) Lower height is sometimes impossible due to low lying land. Since water becomes logged during rainy season so homestead should be higher than main land.</p> <p>c) Uncertain behavior of weather due to climate change.</p> <p>e) Do not properly know the meaning of warning signals.</p>
Riverbank Erosion	<p>a) No individual adaptation, government authority made the embankment.</p> <p>b) Communally put bamboo utensils in erosion place to protect embankment.</p>	<p>a) Poor capacity</p> <p>b) local availability of bamboo</p>	<p>a) Unable to make embankment by the means of community resources.</p> <p>b) Lower socio-economic capacity and shortage of heavy materials. Authority does not take immediate action when embankment starts to erode.</p>
Limited Resources	<p>a) Extensive endeavor to catch fish when fish amount decreases.</p> <p>b) Catch crab in shortage of fish.</p> <p>c) Catch river fish in shortage of sea fish.</p>	<p>a) Traditionally adept at catching fish.</p> <p>b) Women and children may assist catching crab in nearby river. Crab catching materials are individually owned and cheaper.</p> <p>c) Easy instead of catching sea fish.</p>	<p>a) Extensive endeavor and hard labor require balanced diet which they do not have even weekly.</p> <p>b) Cannot catch fish in canals during offseason because powerful people control the canals to cultivate shrimp.</p>
Lightening	<p>a) Stay in safer place with roof.</p>	<p>a) A few people may take shelter in fishing boat (while fishing).</p>	<p>a) Most of the houses are thatched which is not capable to protect from the damage of lightening.</p> <p>b) Fishing boats have a narrow place of the roof which cannot provide shelter for all people staying it.</p>

Source: Fieldwork, 2016

CONCLUSIONS

Globally produced climate change and its adverse impacts on socially excluded and marginalized scheduled caste communities like Rajbangshi produce multi-dimensional vulnerability. This study argues that prerequisite for the successful adaptation of indigenous ethnic and scheduled caste people to climate change is their social inclusion in line with equal treatment to the mainstream community with a view to proliferate institutional, social, individual and communal capacities to meet stress exposed by global climate change. Providing proper education opportunity may create awareness among the members of this community regarding climate stress. National and international organizations should come forward to bring mobility of profession with respecting Rajbangshi heritage to increase adaptive capacity by improving earnings. In order to promote climate resilient housing, durable housing materials may be justified by their traditional ethno housing engineering. Occupational diversifications and alternative livelihood options both during and aftershock may aid to mitigate their sufferings and to increase climate resiliency.

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