

Chapter 8

History and Philosophy of Bioprospecting in Bangladesh: Experience From the Rakhain Indigenous People

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to explain the bioprospecting situation in Bangladesh from an analytical, philosophical, and indigenous standpoint. It has three parts: looking at the philosophical history of bioprospecting; looking at combining the concept of bioprospecting linked with forest and the indigenous people, which also shows the combination of the bioprospecting concept with the indigenous people in Bangladesh; and asking some question based on the critical analysis. Methodologically, this study aligns with the indigenous standpoint theory and critical discourse analysis, where mostly the authors adopted secondary data. The proposal—in effect—is like this: what needs to be done in the question appropriation and translation of indigenous knowledge particularly of the Rakhain people. Although the focus is Bangladesh, the authors believe that this situation exists in many countries. Therefore, this research may raise similar askings and can contribute to global efforts in this regard.

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS BEING RE-SEARCHED

Key questions, easy to ask but hard to resolve, include: who is given and who is denied a voice? by who? why? how? —M.N. Alexiades (2003:24)

Bioprospecting was first defined by Walter V. Reid et al. as “the exploration of biodiversity for commercially valuable genetic resources and biochemicals” (1993: 1)

Bioprospecting is seen as an expropriation of their collective and cumulative innovation, which they have utilized, protected, and conserved since time immemorial. (Shiva 2007: 307)

Bioprospecting describes the practice of collecting and screening plants and other biological materials for commercial purposes (Dutfield, 2001, p. 1) a term first introduced by (Reid et al., 1996). Shiva has described Bioprospecting as a form of sophisticated biopiracy (Shiva, 2007, p. 307). This research project is a critical analysis of the global-local (“glocal”) politics of Bioprospecting (BP) with a focus on the Rakhain community in Bangladesh. One such example is when pharmaceuticals and bioprospectors extract Indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants which is later patented by medical and pharmaceutical companies without taking into account the fact that the knowledge is not invented by the patent and depriving the Indigenous community to the rights of commercial exploitation of the natural resources. Therefore, social science, particularly, anthropology has taken an interest over the last two decades in Bioprospecting which relates to the question of Indigenous people’s rights, local culture, and even intellectual property rights (M N Alexiades, 1996, 2003, 2009; Miguel N Alexiades & Sheldon, 1996; M. F. Brown, 1998, 2004; Brush, 1999, 2013; Brush & Stabinsky, 1996; Hayden, 2003; Millum, 2010; Oguamanam, 2008a, 2008b). Simultaneously, in the south Asian context, mainly from Indian perspective, there has been a small but growing interest in Bioprospecting (for example, Agrawal, 2001, 2005; Reddy, 2006; Shiva, 1997, 2007; M.-C. Torri, 2011; M. C. Torri & Herrmann, 2011)

As documented, material accumulating since 2009 to 2020 indicates that 34 Indigenous communities out of 45 (or 52) of small ‘ethnic groups’ have been subject to mining of Indigenous knowledge (Abdul Awwal Biswas, 2012). This recent ‘conversion’ of Indigenous knowledge into private property represents a continuation of colonial conquest masked by so-called neo-liberal market principles, and there is evidence it has pushed local Indigenous communities backward in their socio-economic life, raising concerns that it may increase tension between Indigenous people and the State of Bangladesh. This ethnographic study engages in an examination of a contemporary rush in mining Indigenous knowledge in Bangladesh and will seek to trace the process by which knowledge is being translated “up” for different levels of interpretation and use.

So, the first part of this chapter looks at the philosophical history of Bioprospecting with our methodological standpoint. In the second part is visualizing the bioprospecting issue in global, regional and local context. We will look at combining the concept of Bioprospecting linked with forest and the Indigenous people. This part also shows the combination of the bioprospecting concept with the Indigenous people in Bangladesh. Finally, Part three demonstrates that where we have no acknowledgement of being aboriginal, then—why—the word was smacked, and who denied it in the UNDRIP treaty. Methodologically, this study aligns with the analytical philosophy and the Indigenous standpoint theory. Our proposal—in effect—is like this: their own name should treat Indigenous people, and The Indigenous people need constitutional recognition, and we know, when we get our space from a legal

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