

Magazine

Tribals Want their Problems to be Addressed

by Nikesh Das

THE United Nations General Assembly launched 1993 as the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples. The theme of the year was "Indigenous People — a New Partnership." Among other things, the year's activities attempted to further international co-operation between states and inter-governmental bodies to solve problems faced by the indigenous peoples, increase their participation in development projects that affect them, and raise public awareness about them. This special year for the indigenous people was certainly supposed to touch 300 million indigenous peoples living in 70 countries around the globe. But the question remains — how a solitary year could be able to address all their problems or was it able to generate an ongoing process to address the problems of the indigenous peoples gradually? Simply to say — what practical results did the year yield?

Like many other countries Bangladesh has indigenous people. Through different sources it is learnt that there are about two million tribal people living in Bangladesh. And like tribal peoples of other countries they do also have problems relating to land, language and culture. So, naturally UN's declaration had a positive effect on the mind of these people.

In response to the UN's call, the Tribal Welfare Association, an association for the tribal people of greater Mymensingh district, organized a ground conference on 20-21 Nov '93 at Shaheb Quarter field, adjacent to Circuit House in Mymensingh town.

This was a conference attended by the Garo, Hajong, Coach, Banal tribes living in the north-eastern part of the country. As Garos are the majority among all these tribes, the leadership management and the whole function was dominated by them. Mr. Promod Mankin MP, the chief coordinator and president of the Tribal Welfare

Association presided over the inaugural session while Barrister Mainul Hosein, president of the Editorial Board of the Ittefaq Group of Publications was the chief guest.

On the second day of the conference, different articles presented by the intellectuals shed new light on various aspects of the tribal peoples living in this area. View were expressed about the past, present and future of the tribes living in greater Mymensingh district as well as elsewhere in the country.

At the end of the two-day conference, a declaration on behalf of the *adivasi* people living in greater Mymensingh and Sylhet districts expressed solidarity with the majority people for the development of the country. It stressed the need for an 'Adivasi Forum' comprising representatives from all the tribal groups living in the country. It also sought cooperation from all concerned to help restore the cultural heritages of the 25 lakh tribal people. The declaration urged the government to take initiative of forming a Ministry of Tribal Affairs to oversee the problems faced by the *adivasi* people in the country. At the same time it sought cooperation of all in solving them.

Deliberations at this conference and many publications related to tribal peoples, showed that like elsewhere in the world, land problem is the main problem of the *adivasi* living in Bangladesh. Social discrimination is another kind of problem which affects a majority of *adivasi* people.

There is no doubt that the indigenous peoples are lagging far behind, in all respects; they must get a chance to develop their socio-economic conditions and pursue their own indigenous notions to their best flourishing.

Though the government did not officially observe or patron-

ize the Year of the Indigenous Peoples, but there is no denying the fact that Bangladesh do have *adivasi* people and they have problems. And the government cannot deny the need of a proper policy for ensuring the participation of the *adivasi* people in national development. Indeed for achieving a smooth development of the country, proper planning is a must from the government side in this end.

Barrister Mainul Hosein rightly

said, "It shows the government has no interest for *adivasi* people. As they think we have no problems so we doubt whether they want our development or not."

*What are the main problems of the *adivasi* people living in Bangladesh?*

Our problem is that we are simply undeveloped. Such a condition itself is a problem. Alongwith this we have land and security problems and always we are in the apprehension of being cheated. Our existence is at stake as we have no participation in decision making which affects us much.

What was the success of your conference?

We were very successful in organizing the conference. Thousands of *adivasi* people participated in that. They expressed their determination to restore their own cultural heritage. At the same time they showed their interest for national development. I think it is our success.

Have you any plan for greater mass movement demanding the rights of the indigenous people?

After forming Tribal Welfare Association in 1977 we have been working, as far as possible, against all the injustices faced by the tribal people. We will continue the process democratically. But just at present we have no plan to organize mass movement. If the need arises in future, then we would think of it seriously.

Why the government did not cooperate with your effort to organize the conference in Bangladesh?

This is very sad that Bangladeshi government did not cooperate with us, saying, "In Bangladesh the *adivasi* people have no problem." We are rather angry at the government's attitude.

What was the aim of the conference?

As United Nations declared the year as the Year of the Indigenous People so we felt it our duty to observe it. It is necessary to focus our problems and make apparent our existence in front of the majority people of the country as well as the world.

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