

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES DAY

Ethnic minorities: A strength in diversity

ALBERT MANKIN

"BANGALA," the present Bangladesh, has always been an abode for scores of ethnic groups from time immemorial. Besides the Bengali majority people, there are 45 ethnic groups with approximately 2.5 millions (according to the Bangladesh Adivasi Forum) living side by side in this country. With a marked concentration of 11 ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the rest of the 33 ethnic groups live on plain lands scattered throughout the country. The existence of numerous ethnic groups has enriched the human geography of the region that exhibits cultural and social diversity.

However, the new nation that emerged in 1971 as Bangladesh after a year of bloody struggle for recognition willfully ignored the very existence of ethnic groups other than the Bengalis. The country's constitution, framed in 1972, is the proof of such willful negation of the right to be different. It has had policy implications on ethnic groups as a whole. Initially there had been a forceful demand from the ruling regime that the ethnic groups in the country should accept "Bangalism" as their identity. This ideological posture contradicts the historical language movement of 1952 and then the liberation war in 1971, fought in the name of the recognition of Bengali identity as a language and as culturally different. The historic opportunity for an harmonious multi-cultural Bangladesh was lost and set the stage for three decades of struggle. The subsequent history of the country is a testimony of the immediate backlashes of this policy adoption.

Mr. Manabendra Narayan Lama, the then sole MP from the Jummas of Chittagong Hill Tracts protested the move for framing the country's constitution on a single nationality. He insisted that the constitution should be based on multi-ethnicity. He demanded that the *adivasis* have rights to be different with distinct cultures, customs, history, traditions and they are

Demands of ethnic groups are vibrant and grow stronger. The voice that was raised in 1972 for equality, fraternity and for constitutional recognition still vibrates in the depths of indigenous people's minds, in the murmuring forests and alleys of hills where they live, and it is getting louder and is trumpeting in the streets of the capital.



Adivasis rallying for rights

not Bengalis His demand was forcefully turned down. The result was the formation of the *Shantibahini* and the struggle for autonomy by the *Jummas* in the Chittagong Hill region lasting for almost three decades. The struggle was concluded through a peace treaty in 1997 led by Joyotiridra Bhudipriya Larma, Chairman, *Parbataya Chattagram Jana Sanhati Samity*.

Almost simultaneously, there was another struggle in the North-Eastern part of Bangladesh (the then greater Mymensingh), on the Bangladesh/Meghalaya (India) border in 1975 following the death of Sheik Mujibur Rahman. This struggle was commonly known as *Kaderia Songram* (insur-

gence) because it was led by a famous freedom fighter Kader Siddiquee. The majority of the recruits were from among indigenous/tribal communities -- Garos and Hajongs who were freedom fighters earlier in 1971 (90 percent of Garos, Koch, and Hajongs residing along the border of greater Mymensingh had to take refuge in India during the liberation. Hundreds of them joined freedom struggle). Being frustrated for the willful ignorance of their sacrifice and contributions to the 1971 liberation war, they justified joining the 1975 insurgency as an opportunity to promote their rights. It was President Ziaur Rahman who took

the initiative of negotiations that led to the end of the insurgency in 1977.

This adoption of the policy of ethnic majority has eventually defeated the very ideology of democracy, human rights and good governance -- and above all the very ideology of nationalism. It was nationalism that brought the country together to throw away the hegemony of West Pakistan. It is indeed a paradox that the nation imbued with an ideology of nationalism would adopt a hegemonistic attitude towards other nationalities in the country. A chance for the development of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society was missed. Consequently in many cases the rights of *adivasis* have

been denied -- such as in the case of the Modhupur Forest where century-old roads are blocked with 6 feet high brick walls, ancestral lands taken, livelihood bases robbed -- and all these are done without discussion and consultation. Modhupur National park will be built for providing recreational facilities for the affluent middle class of Dhaka.

Demands of ethnic groups are vibrant and grow stronger. The voice that was raised in 1972 for equality, fraternity and for constitutional recognition still vibrates in the depths of indigenous people's minds, in the murmuring forests and alleys of hills where they live, and it is getting louder and is trumpeting in the streets of the capital. It is time policy makers and the people of good-will in the country open their ears and eyes to the rightful demands of 45 ethnic communities numbering almost 2.5 million. It is encouraging to see that thousands of voices from the mainstream Bengalis -- printed media and civil society groups, are raised in support of the ethnic communities and their rightful demands. In the cases of Modhupur National park at Tangail and at Mahalchari event, Kagrachori Chittagong Hill Tracts, Eco-tourism at Kulaura, Maulovibazar people from all walks of life came to protest. Eventually this will not only prevent and protect the indigenous communities from marginalisation and social exclusion -- it will also bless the nation at large by enhancing democratisation processes, human rights development, and arresting negative trends towards mono-ethnicitism. Our generations will be enriched with ethnic diversity and cultural richness. After all, the signature of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Treaty is the tacit recognition of the very existence of indigenous and Tribal peoples in the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh -- so why this hesitation and delay in the constitutional recognition of all ethnic groups in the country?

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Only the strong will survive

When Reagan and Clinton were seeking re-election, they didn't go after their opponents directly, in part because they didn't have to. Those incumbents knew that there's a point at which strong and tough can look weak and desperate.

JONATHAN ALTER

WE know what "strength" means to Lance Armstrong, the cancer survivor who won the Tour de France for a record sixth time last month. He's selling 5 million yellow bracelets for \$1 apiece with the words "Live Strong" to raise money for other survivors. For Armstrong, it's not about the bike but the head: staying positive and resourceful -- living strong in a dangerous time -- is the best defense against those sleeper cells.

Cancer and terrorism, war and politics -- whatever the metaphor, the definition of "strength" will determine this year's presidential election. Polls show that undecided voters mostly agree with John Kerry on the issues, but they are only now focusing on whether he would be a strong leader. President Bush -- whatever one thinks of him -- is widely seen as resolute, steadfast, and therefore "strong," as conventionally defined. Kerry's challenge in his acceptance speech was not just to project strength but to define it more broadly, to persuade voters to appreciate him for "seeing the complexities" -- and to show, as Bill Clinton told the convention, that "strength and wisdom are not opposing values."

So it was no surprise that Kerry, surrounded by his Vietnam buddies, used variations on the word "strength" 17 times in his speech, injecting a little testosterone into each policy proposal. He raced through the text like Armstrong at the finish line, which some

critics say wrecked the good lines he had prepared. I thought the haste inadvertently transmitted energy and passion, which -- for a man falsely depicted as listlessly lacking convictions -- looked strong.

Bush believes that the best way to reinforce his strongman image is to stay on the offensive. He's betting that the dynamic of the campaign will allow him to level a new stinging charge every day that Kerry must then "explain." Whatever the facts, complex explanations look weak and defensive, so Bush himself rarely offers them; the president's biggest applause line on the stump is when he says he would do everything the same all over again in Iraq if he had the chance. "There is nothing complicated about supporting our troops," he said last week.

The president is comfortable and skillful on the attack, just as he was in his towel-snapping days as a preppy wise guy. And he's lucky to live in a time when it's not big news when a sitting president throws punches. By contrast, when President Jimmy Carter in 1980 suggested that his opponent, Ronald Reagan, might prove divisive if he won, the frenzied reaction from the press was that Carter was being "mean" and "unpresidential" by attacking his rival instead of running on his record. He was forced to back down.

When Reagan and Clinton were seeking re-election, they didn't go after their opponents directly, in part because they didn't have to. Those incumbents knew that there's a point at which strong and tough can look weak

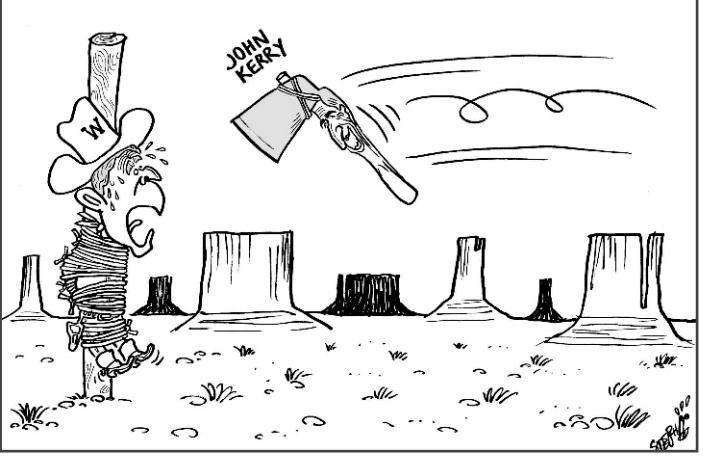
and desperate. Without a plausible second-term agenda (and it's getting late for one), Bush risks coming across as a carping fearmonger. Both candidates know that the more optimistic candidate usually wins, but it's harder for Bush to pivot to the positive (a la Lance Armstrong's definition of strength) when so much of his campaign revolves around taking down Kerry.

Despite his long face, Kerry has it easier in this regard. In Boston he figured out a way to barbecue Bush without mentioning him by name, except to ask him to take the high road. This passive-aggressive approach was meant for swing voters who like Bush personally, but it's also just smart politics. The secret to winning any election is to strangle your opponent without leaving fingerprints.

It's also the secret to real strength in the world. Bush's Iraq policy is a textbook illustration of why the sword works best when it's sheathed. The mythical giant up in the hills loses his power when he lumbers down into daylight. Now the whole world knows that American military forces are stretched thin and not as infallible as advertised. The war on terror is known as "asymmetrical combat," where the weak -- a few men with box cutters -- can humiliate the strong. So old-fashioned definitions of power don't mean as much. As the 9/11 Commission reported, our new world requires a more resourceful approach, with fresh attitudes toward intelligence, diplomacy and international education as important as anything coming out of the Pentagon. This will demand an eye for complexity, not a line in the sand.

Both candidates this year are bicyclists and Armstrong fans. Although he is a Texan, the champion has made no endorsement. But Armstrong's formula for beating cancer goes beyond simply focusing on a goal and pedaling doggedly toward it. His books and Web site recommend ceaselessly exploring options, second-guessing doctors and finding hope out of being informed. To "live strong" isn't easy, and there's nothing uncomplicated about it.

Jonathan Alter is a senior writer for Newsweek.
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A private relief operation

[THE AUTHOR HAS REQUESTED ANONYMITY]

ON Friday, July 30th we went on a private relief operation. Thanks to the contribution of our friends, relatives, and colleagues, we were able to raise Tk. 85,000. In addition, we also received 1200 *chapatis*, supplied 100 each by 12 households and 200 bottled of mineral/boiled water.

With the cash resources, we bought 200 sarees, 800 kgs of rice, 200 kgs of *chira*, 200 kgs of lentils, 50 kgs of molasses, 1000 packets of Orsaline, 200 matchboxes, 200 small boxes of powdered milk, 200 packets of candles, and 10 kgs of alum/fitkiri

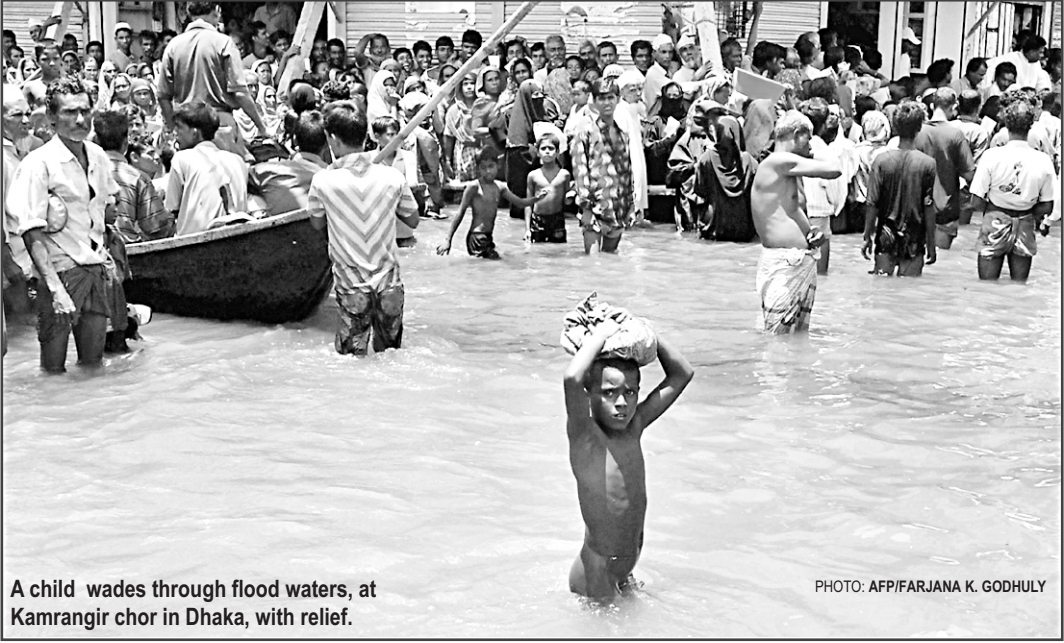
(for water purification). We put the above materials (other than the sarees and the water bottles) plus the chapatis in 200 plastic bags, each weighing about 10 kgs.

With a supply of about two tons (2000kgs), we divided ourselves in two groups. My wife, sister-in-law, son, and a colleague went to Manikgonj with 50 bags, 50 sarees, and 30 bottles of water in the back of their Toyota Prado. My two brother-in-laws and I went to Krishnanagar at Dhamrai upazilla with the remaining supplies, in a pick-up truck and the back of a Pajero. We took an engine boat from Bank Town (a few kilometers short of Savar). We started from there at 9 a.m. and

reached Krishnanagar at about 10:15 am.

Water level: The flood water had receded a bit, by about 3-4 inches or so, as could be observed from marks on the houses. The water level was still at an alarming level. In some places, we could have touched the overhead electric wires of REB/BPDB with our hands if we stood up on the boat. We passed by the top part of railing of a bridge (barely visible) and were told that boats used to pass underneath the same bridge.

Economic activities: Next to the damage to the infrastructure, perhaps the most negative impact of the flood was lack of economic activity. On our



A child wades through flood waters, at Kamrangir chor in Dhaka, with relief.

PHOTO: AFP/FARJANA K. GODHULY

way to Savar, we found hundreds of trucks parked idle on the roadside and small ships and barges anchored in the water. The only economic activity that we could see were separating jute fibre from the stock, (in neck-deep water), and some fishing.

Relief distribution at Krishnanagar: We went to 14 clusters of villages and distributed the materials. My brother-in-law had earlier informed the locals about our trip. People were waiting for us and we distributed the materials in an orderly fashion. Although at each spot about 40/50 people would assemble, only 8/10 families, the most needy among them, would receive the materials. Some people also came in rafts made of banana tree planks to receive the materials. Our last stop was the shelter at Rowail High School. By then, we were down to our last 20 sarees and 20 bags of supplies. We distributed them according to a prioritised list prepared by a school teacher.

Relief distribution at Manikgonj: My wife and her team distributed their materials at Manikgonj. They finished their supply in half an hour. Because there were large number of recipients, instead of giving both bag of food supplies and the saree, they gave either a bag or a saree to each family.

Swap: One of the mothers opted to take a saree from my wife. She came back and asked what was inside the bag. My wife told her that there was food inside. She returned the saree and took the bag, saying that her children were without food.

What we could have done differently: We took all sarees but no lungis. We gave a saree and a bag to an elderly person. He returned the saree and wanted a lungi in exchange. But we had none. We gave him Taka 50 to buy a lungi. He was a widower living alone, with no use of a saree.

Low points: Our low point was at the shelter at Rowail High School. We had run out of supply and there were a few

hundred people at the camp. Suddenly, while tidying up the boat we found 200 small packets (250 gms each) of *chira* and *gur*. We were not aware of the supply; apparently a friend of mine sent these, late at night, hearing about our mission from my wife. My younger sister's husband gave us Tk. 10,000 and said "Let's give this money." He told us that he carried the money in case we needed it. These were all in 50 Taka notes. We disembarked from the boat, lined up all the people and distributed the *chira* and *gur* packets and the money and returned to the boat. Our day was saved because of these extra cash and materials. Our supplies were so inadequate. We could have exhausted even 10 tons, if we had them.

Curiously, as we were distributing relief, someone from the crowd asked us why we were not taking any pictures. We did not take any camera. However, we had a phone-camera that we used to take picture of the flood. But as decided earlier, we did not take any picture of ourselves distributing relief materials.

High points: We experienced our first high point when at one of the villages we offered a saree and a bag to a villager and he said, "My house has not been flooded, I give it to the person standing next to me; he is poorer than me."

Our next high point occurred as we were returning from the shelter center. Someone approached us in a small boat to give us 4 packets of potato chips by Bombay sweets. This was no sumptuous meal but a great thank you. We had sandwiches from home to eat at noon. Afterwards, we ate the same *chira*, *gur*, and the water that we were distributing among the flood victims.

We returned home at 7:15 pm. I had my dinner and went straight into the bed. With the guilt of not doing anything for the flood victims gone away from mind, I slept like a log.

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7X3