

Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development

A Regional Dialogue on: "National Election: 2007: Civil Society Initiative for Accountable Development," was held in Rangamati on 7th July, 2006 under the joint sponsorship of CPD, The Daily Star, Prothom Alo and Channel-i. Members of the Citizens' Committee, leaders of various political parties, people belonging to various professions and from all walks of life joined the dialogue. This supplement contains the summary of the discussions. The names and identities of the participants are published below. Due to constraint of space we are not able to publish the comments of all the participants. -- Editor

Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya

This is the sixth Nagrik Dialogue, being held at Rangamati, under the joint sponsorship of The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, Channel-i and CPD. Under the present system Nagrik Dialogues are held at specific locations and cities of relative significance. We have observed that often little effort is made to reach the voices of religious minority and the ethnic groups to the people in general. In that context today's dialogue here at Rangamati is of considerable significance. Prior to the election of 2001 we prepared a document with the help of task force composed of experts, as to what should be done, from the point of view of the civil society. This document was subsequently handed over to the elected government. The reports were discussed at various forums. In 2003 we took a similar step in order to find out as to how many of the recommendations were implemented.

We are not saying that the country has not progressed, as a matter of fact there has been an increase in the income per head, productivity has increased, there has been an increase in the rate of education and a reduction in child mortality. However because of an undesirable twist in the pace of development, the fruits of development have not reached the common people. As a matter of fact, whatever little that reached them could not go down to the people living in the remote areas of the country. The gap between the rich and the poor has considerably increased, as in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the people affected by the river erosion and the people living in the Char areas. The gap between the religious minority and the poor has also increased manifold. The gap in the quality of lives of the people in villages, and those in the cities have further widened. In the same way the gap between the villages and the cities have widened manifold. This has been the overall prevailing scenario of our development over the past 15 years. Based on the experience gained over the past 15 years we tried to visualize as to what would be the scenario in the country in the next 15 years when Bangladesh would attain the age of 50. Keeping this in mind we formed a Nagrik Committee comprising of a number of well-known individuals from the civil society. We have already made some progress in making a framework with the help of this committee. We have termed this as our "vision". A one page list of aspirations of this "vision" has already been distributed to you. Please give us your views indicating as to how much are you in agreement with it. We have stated very clearly that the main spirit behind people's aspirations in Bangladesh is the spirit of our great war of

liberation of 1971. Our basic values stem from that spirit and that will play the main role in shaping the future of the country. We therefore urge you to read this paper with care. Please do tell us if you wish to make changes, additions or revision including a change in the style of the language.

Matiu Rahman

Greetings and welcome to all. I express my thanks to all of you who have joined us here today braving the incessant downpour. You have heard about our initiative from Dr. Debapriya and have learnt about it from newspapers and the television. We have carried out similar initiatives in Mymensingh, Jessor, Comilla, Barisal and Sylhet involving public representatives, politicians and conscious citizens of the respective localities. This is a continuous process. Reports of the meetings you can see in Prothom Alo and also in television, particularly through Channel-i. Our message is brief and precise. 35 years have passed since we gained our independence, but we still have innumerable problems and we must find ways to solve them. We are, at the same time, hoping to resolve the problems facing the indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. I can confidently say that we are in full agreement with your rights, aspirations and struggle. We are with you today and shall be beside you also in the future. We hope that you shall not only participate but also give your support.

Habibur Rahman Habib

As we turn our attention to the national politics we find that we stand divided on ideological grounds, and are also divided on partisan considerations. Today we are going round the country looking for honest candidates. Supposing we find the right candidate and yet he or she fails to obtain nomination of the party, what would happen then? If there is no fixed criteria for selecting a candidate after due survey at field levels then people will reluctantly put the seals on mere symbols. This is how we have built a group of people in the country that is based on mere symbols. It will be difficult for us to elect a competent candidate so long as the political parties do not give nominations to the right candidates after careful assessment and scrutiny. On the other hand consider this; even if we were successful in electing a competent candidate following the initiatives of Prothom Alo, the Daily Star and Channel-i there still exists a law in the Parliament that the concerned member would lose his or her seat if he or she casts vote against the party's decision. Thus, the good man I voted for is driven out since he voted against the party's decision driven by dictates of conscience. The civil society is quick to criticize the member whereas the individual is a mere victim of a system.

People of the Hill Tracts region have long been cut off from the mainstream politics at the national level. They were integrated in the national politics after 1997, but the Peace Accord is yet to be implemented. Neither the past government, nor the present, did anything about it. At one stage people of the locality were in doubt about this accord. On the other hand there are many who are trying to make political gains by taking advantage of the Agreement. The Peace Accord has since been accepted in principle. Many a times we refuse to recognise the truth due to political considerations. I sincerely hope that this will create the due awareness amongst the people of the country and, hopefully, we shall see a reflection of that in the coming election.

Kazi Nazrul Islam

To the best of my knowledge as many as nine education commissions have been constituted in the country so far, but none of these has seen the light of day. Today there is discrepancy in the level of education between the villages and the cities, education has gone out of reach for the people of the villages. It would be useful if this matter finds explicit expression in the "vision" document. Today, while we are discussing about the development of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, most of the areas do not have electricity. There is acute shortage of safe water. Despite the fact that there is much talk about attracting tourists, it is most likely that the water of the Kaptai Lake is most polluted. What I wish to reiterate is that electricity must be provided to every household, and also safe drinking water. Where is all the money that is supposed to be utilised for the development of the locality? We know that the locality is rich in natural resources which are not being exploited in a planned way.

Alo Rani Aich

Today an all round awareness is seen due to the various initiatives, but has there been any awareness amongst the politicians? Why do we come across barbaric oppression of women by the police? We wish to see those who will be elected by us in 2007 as honest, wise and capable individuals.

You should also acquaint them with the proposals being submitted by CPD to the government, and how the proposals are being assessed. We have innumerable problems in the Hill Tracts. We are not allowed to cut trees, or go for fishing, so some arrangements have to be made for livelihood of the people of the region. Educational institutions will have to be developed.

Sunil Kanti Dey

There are three Zilla Parishads at Rangamati. If elections are held these Parishads could have proper public representation. Referring to the voter list of the Hill Tracts many people have asked why there should be two voter lists in the same country? Clear guidelines already exist in the laws enacted by the Parliament related to the three Zilla Parishads stipulating as to who would be the voters. Hence how can it be unconstitutional if the list is prepared based on the acts passed by the Parliament? At the same time I would like to request you to include in your agenda the issue of the constitutional rights of the religious minority and the indigenous peoples. We have to know why we shall not be allowed the use of mobile phones despite the fact we are as much citizens of the country as any one else, then why this discrimination?

Rocky Chakma

To date I have voted three times on my free will. Let me say from that experience that all the three times we have been deceived. What is needed is for the Zilla Parishads to be fully operational. Whereas a Parishad should have 34 members, headed by a Chairman it has a total of five members and they are elected through fax communication. Therefore there is always a doubt as to whether they are truly elected people's representative or not. They usually become hostage to different parties and their interests. I wish to tell our future Members of the Parliament that if they are unable to protect our rights then they should simply restore our basic rights. I wish to see proper representation of the small ethnic groups in the Parliament.

Advocate Dulal Kanti Sarker

Today we are talking about capable candidates whereas all capable candidates are being murdered one by one. In number three of the list on Nagrik's Aspirations we have indicated about the equal rights for the religious minority and various ethnic groups. I would like to replace the word "equal rights by "rights on priority basis". I would also request that a process of accountability be set for the bottlenecks that stand in the way of institutionalizing the democratic process.

Priyadarshi Chakma

How can there be proper election of people's representative in the region without the voter list prepared in accordance with the provisions of the Peace Accord. I believe as per terms of the Peace accord, those who are currently representing us in the Parliament or the Municipal Committees do not legally represent us.

Lakhami Prasad Chakma

We have not been recognized by the constitution. Due to this crisis of identity our rights are yet to be recognised. Through this forum I propose that arrangements be made so that we are given due identity in the next session of the Parliament. The Peace Accord signed between the Government and the Janshanghati Samity in 1997 was created for establishing Local Government system. Whereas with Operation Uttorom still continuing,



whether it is general administration or the regional Parishads, none of the systems is able to function. I, therefore, appeal to all the members of the civil society, and the political parties, to arrange withdrawal of Martial Law from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. At the same time let the Zilla Parishads be reorganised, and a voter list prepared as per provision of the Accord.

Jamal Nrzul Islam

One of my books under the title Shailpo, Shattiya O Samaj was published in 1998. I would like to read out some excerpts from that book since they are relevant to what is being discussed here today. It also talks about the Hill tracts. "1947 saw the end of the colonial rule, preceded by the Pakistan Movement, then came the Language Movement and finally, even after our success in the War of Liberation there has been little change in the overall condition of our poor. So much so, that we failed to reach the benefits of education in our own mother tongue, Bengali, to the villages and remote areas of the country. Our poor continue to be deprived in matters of education, medical facilities, access to courts and judicial services. I do not think lack of resources to be the main cause for it. With the right kind of attitude, and proper initiatives, we could still do a lot for the poorer section of our population within the available limited resources. I believe that neglecting the poor is a common ailment in each of the countries of the sub-continent. The tribal people, like the Kohls Beels and the Santals, were being neglected from time immemorial, whether during the Hindu Rule, the Muslims or the time of the British Rule. They were not only neglected, but were often subjected to oppression. They were considered as subhuman. By now a number of these groups of people may have become extinct. We have, indeed, much to learn from their lifestyles and culture."

I am now coming to the issue of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. "This is a complex problem that requires concerted and coordinated efforts of all concerned. It may take a long time before the Accord can be implemented, for which we need to have an environment backed by patience, tolerance and cordiality. It may so happen that a particular tribe has not accepted the Accord in full. Here what may be needed is free and frank discussions amongst various tribes and other ethnic groups irrespective of their cast, creed or party affiliations. The tribal and the non-tribal people of the Hill Tracts belong to the same family. We have to find solutions from amongst ourselves. If we are to bring the tribal people close to us then we ought to mingle with them, learn their language, and even sing their songs and acquaint ourselves with their lifestyles, history and culture. ... The huge burden of accumulated foreign debt should not be thrust on these people. We have somehow been able to withstand the burden but they may not be able to." I have said before also that the World Bank, IMF, and ADB must leave this place.

Monishapan Dewan

By development we often understand building of bridges and culverts and construction of roads etc. But the essence of development is, in effect, more comprehensive and diverse. From that angle we are still lagging behind. To arrive at that stage of development we need the combined efforts of all. As a factor amongst other third world countries, we are yet to decide as to what kind of benefits we should look for, Party, self or the country. To this effect we are lagging behind since we do not have the required strength of character and commitment. Therefore, in order to overcome the crisis of leadership we need to strike at its root cause. Without the reformation of the entire society this will not be possible. We shall have to reform the Judiciary befitting the modern day world.

No midterm or long term planning of our overall economy has been undertaken during the past 35 years. Whatever growth in the GDP has been achieved, we are not being able to use it for the benefit of the service sector in a planned way. This is mainly due to mismanagement, corruption and various irregularities. Today, we are being compelled to follow the dictates of the World Bank. The World Bank, in effect, is a multinational company of sorts that looks after its own interests. I say that our politicians and the economists should look towards the changes taking place around the world. A country has to have two resources for it to prosper: Fuel and Strength. Today India is having friendly relations with Pakistan. China's relations with India is getting better. All these are taking place based on economic factors.

This Hill Tract Region is an important resource of the country. If the indigenous people who live in these hilly areas are given proper exposure then, from here alone, millions of dollars could be added to the country's economy. Therefore we should ensure survival of these small groups of people with appropriate development planning initiatives. At the same time the politicians have to think about their security. If we plan to utilize the resources that lie beneath this land then we must ensure peace in the region.

I have named the present political culture of the country as 'Political Kabadi culture'. In the game of Kabadi after the first one is downed the rest swoop on him. It is the same situation here. If one plans to be involved in the development activities of the country everybody pounces on him. I believe that here, too, we have to prepare yet another extensive document like that of the PRSP. I have named the document "Mental poverty eradication strategy". In order to eradicate mental poverty we have to have a long-term

strategic plan. If this is not done where will you get those people with wisdom and foresight who will come forward with pragmatic midterm and long term planning so that the problems we are facing could be resolved step by step. Today we are facing a crisis of good people in the country. The general members of the public are not capable of thinking at the same level at which I am thinking today. Everybody wishes to have ready returns. Your initiative is a good one, but it would be difficult to reap its benefits overnight. You are proceeding with a task that will take a long time to accomplish, however, step by step, this will bring a change in the society.

Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya

On different occasions it has been suggested that two different kinds of training should be undertaken for the politicians: one on Social Behavioral Change and the other on Total Quality Management, and now Monishapan Dewan has suggested preparing a paper on Mental Poverty Eradication Strategy.

Shukumar Dewan

Alongside the registration of the political parties the politicians should also be registered. There should be a provision for debarring the politicians who change party affiliations for a second nomination in the next five years. The Election Commission has to be duly informed about the change in party affiliation. A law must be introduced so that civil servants and members of the armed forces shall not be allowed to participate in elections within five years of their retirement. I believe every one should contest from within his or her own constituency. If he contests the election from a different constituency then the rights of people of the area are undermined.

Shagrika Roza

In order for a country to prosper we need to establish equal rights for both, men and women. We therefore need to have direct elections for the seats reserved for women. Amongst these seats there should be special allocation for the tribal people. We have to ensure that the indigenous people are able to enjoy all the rights applicable to a citizen of the country. The right to land for the tribal people has to be guaranteed by the constitution.

Hangshaddaj Chakma

In order to conduct an election the Administration has to be neutral, whereas it is meting out step-motherly treatment to us. I wish to cite here an example. In a book written by the Deputy Commissioner of Khagrachari, the Chakmas, Marma and the Tripuras have been described as infiltrators, and the Bengalis have been described as the earliest settlers of the region. Can there be a free and fair election in the presence of such a biased Deputy Commissioner? I, therefore, demand that the Deputy Commissioner of Khagrachari be removed before the election. Election in the three Hill Tract districts should be held after a proper voter list is prepared. Members of the Administration known to be partisan should be removed.

Shantoshito Chakma

I am talking about Chittagong Hill Tracts. Over the past two decades thousands have been rendered homeless. Over 70 thousand people took shelter in neighboring India. Internally 9028 families became destitute. Over a dozen incidents of genocide took place. Those rendered destitute during that time have not been rehabilitated, either during the Awami League government or by the BNP led present regime. No proper voter list has been prepared, therefore there cannot be a proper election, and anyone elected cannot be a true public representative. The voter list has to be prepared as per provision of the Peace Accord, taking into consideration those who are permanent residents of the locality. Why should government servants, the police and members of the armed forces cast their votes in the local and national elections of the region?

In Chittagong Hill Tracts there is considerable distance between the residence of the voters and polling centers. In such cases the centers should be rationally relocated, or else the voters will not be able to cast votes according to their wishes.

Shudatta Bikash Tanchunga

I would like to talk about some specific issue. First, the MPs should be engaged only in framing laws. Second, before a law is passed by the parliament adequate advance notice should be given so that there is ample opportunity to comment upon it. Third, no children should be "used" during the election. Finally I would like to add a point to no: 3 of the Nagrik list of aspirations that, a law be enacted guaranteeing the rights of tribal people.

Shishir Chakma

As we are discussing matters here, there are many amongst the Seeks who are going hungry. They are neither given the right to cultivate Jhoom nor are they given their rights to the land. They are not even receiving any aid from the government. No matter what we may say in public we shall cast our votes for either Awami League or BNP. This is the prevailing culture in Bangladesh. This Peace Accord has not been signed and agreed upon by Awami League alone, but also by the governments. BNP is not sincere in implementing the treaty. No matter what, as long as political decisions are not implemented there can be no solution to such issues of reforms and accountability.

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