

Celebrating Bijhu

SHANTIMOY CHAKMA *from Rangamati*

The traditional 'Bijhu Festival' of the ethnic communities in the hill districts of Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) concluded more than a week ago amidst widespread celebration.

With a vow to save their cultures and traditions as well as hoping for a full implementation of CHT accord, eleven ethnic minority communities in three hill districts -- Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari, observed the 'Bijhu'.

On the eve of the *Bijhu Utsab*, the festival Committee organised a huge colourful rally on April 11 in the hill town of Rangamati, where thousands of different ethnic people from far-flung areas took part. Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma, widely known as Santu Larma, who is chairman of CHT Regional Council and also chief of Parbabattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS), inaugurated the rally while Barrister Debasish Roy, chief of the Chakma Circle, addressed the congregation as the chief guest. Former law advisor Hassan Arif, Gano Forum leader Pankaj Bhattacharya and journalist Syed Abul Moksud also addressed the function as special guests.

At the rally, Santu Larma claimed that the indigenous people of the CHT were losing their culture and customs as the CHT peace accord has yet to be implemented. He also said that the people of the CHT were passing their days amid increasing insecurity. "We signed the peace accord with the government for preservation and development of our ethnic culture. Even eleven years have elapsed since signing the treaty, but (the necessary) steps have not been taken for its full implementation," Santu said at the rally. Larma also said the time for words was over and that only actions would help restore the faith of the ethnic minorities in the Chittagong peace accord. He also alleged, that the lands of indigenous people were still being grabbed by Bengali settlers in the hills.

Calling upon the ethnic people to uphold their culture and traditions, Debasish Roy said indigenous people were still being deprived, tortured and harassed by their rulers. Hassan Arif added that due to a lack of political will, the indigenous people have been deprived of their fundamental rights for a long time.

Indigenous people usually observe the *Bijhu Utsab* for three days, which includes the last two days of the old year and first day of the Bengali New Year. However, the Marmas celebrate their *Sangraine Utsab* (*Pani Khela*) on the second day of Bengali New Year. Eleven ethnic communities who have been living in the CHT since time immemorial -- Chakma, Marma, Tangchangya, Tripura, Lusai, Bom, Pankhua, Mro, Khiyang, Chak and Khumi celebrate the Bijhu by holding different elaborate programmes each year.

Bijhu-Sangraine-Boisuk-Bisu-Bihu Udjapan committee and various indigenous cultural organisations in CHT organised different traditional sports such as *Tumoru, Ghila, Nadeng, Pour* and *Dhanu khela*, along with a rally, an art competition, a cultural function and a prize giving ceremony.

The Chakmas call the event *Bijhu*, the Marmas, *Sangraine*, the Tangchangyas, *Bisu* the Tripuras *Boisuk* and the Ahmia term it *Bihu*. However, in general, the festival takes place in three parts. The first day of the three-day festival is called *Fulbijhu*, second day is *Mulbijhu* and the first day of the Bengali New Year is called *"Gojjya Pojjya Din."* On the *Fulbijhu*, the Tripura people in Rangamati separately organised a traditional *Gouraya Nritya* and a bathing session of the elderly men and women at Tripura Kalyan Foundation. In the Bandarban and Khagrachhari, ethnic people also