

# Traditionalism or modernity?

It is truly a struggle between traditionalism and modernism. The Bengalis can also incorporate some of the indigenous cultural or technological practices into their own, which is called shared learning.

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ETHNIC communities are an integral part of our civilisation, yet there are differences with the mainstream population in resisting change. In the course of time, modern technology causes identical changes in these ethnic communities, especially in their cultures. Changes in the ethnic or indigenous population of Bangladesh began in the post-colonial period, and are the result of industrialisation and modernisation mainly.

In the case of Bangladesh, the effect of industrialisation is not much applicable for these changes, rather it is modernisation that has brought them about. The ethnic communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) serve a classic example of native technologies of livelihood becoming victims of the negative aspects of modern technologies. They struggle between traditionalism and modernism, and are caught between change and resistance.

We must feel the pain of the people not from the perspective of mere politics or legality, but by accepting the ethnic communities of CHT as a part and parcel of the same human family that we all belong to. It is time to step forward to tie the knot between the plain and the hilly Bangladesh. In this regard ten people of the young generation of CHT and ten students from the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), and Jahangirnagar University were selected to find out whether these people can move on with the process of modernisation by incorporating the positive aspects in their lives.

## Impact of modernisation on socio-cultural structure

The changes that took place in the

culture and lifestyle of the indigenous groups of CHT during the colonial period were mainly because of their conversion to Christianity and involvement in the urban workforce. But there is no doubt that changes continued to take place in the language, culture and other spheres of the society even in the postcolonial era. The indigenous people of the hills are bound to pick up aspects of Bengali culture to adjust with the process of modernisation, but the Bengalis are not inclined to practice and incorporate the livelihood practices of indigenous people -- which could have benefited both parties as horizontal learning.

### The reality of modernisation

It should be noted that although much modification took place among the indigenous people, there was no involvement of the state. The only step that was taken was the establishment of a cultural institute to look after their language and culture. Regrettably, very little of the indigenous communities' cultural life is highlighted in the mass media. In Bangladesh, although a decision had been taken about five years back to allow indigenous people to obtain primary education in their own (mother) language, it is yet to be implemented. The survival of indigenous languages is now at stake because of the domineering influence of the state language, Bengali. Here, some examples of language and other socio-cultural changes are presented.

- The children have to study only Bengali from the beginning of their school life. Professor Mesbah Kamal commented: "They find Bengali language very difficult at the early age and this is the reason they lose interest in study and drop out from school." He argued that they should have the facility to learn in their own language at least at the primary level. Ronaldo Chakma (25) of

Sarkari Bangla College, Dhaka and Anondo Joti Chakma (30), teacher of B.S. Institute, feel that it is necessary to study in their own language at least up to primary level. On the other hand, Uzzal Chakma (32), political activist, and Sonali Chakma, development activist, think that Bengali is the state language of Bangladesh so they have to cope with the language. According to Sumit Chakma (18), student of Rangamati Sarkari College: "In India, Hindi speaking people are the majority, but it is not possible to move around India only with the knowledge of Hindi language. For example, in south India Hindi is not at all spoken, rather English is used if someone does not know a south Indian language."

- Land is the biggest problem in the CHT and can be regarded as the cause of the present conflict in the region. There are at least two reasons for the scarcity of land in the area. The first one is the Kaptai Hydro-electric Project. Only a few years later, a settlement project was started in the Hills to relieve the densely populated plain lands of Bangladesh, which is regarded as the second reason.

- Bengali influence, as well as that of the British, has transformed the habits of dressing, particularly in respect of clothing which cover certain parts of the body within socio-religious conventions. The assimilation of Bengali culture in dressing does not imply the acceptance of Bengali culture in general. In this regard, I think that the perspective towards the attire, as well as cultural practices of ethnic communities, should be taken as a positive. The attire of any community, according to its own culture, is decent, and the others should respect that. Nowadays, the situation in the towns has changed to some extent. Some Hill people wear modern western attire. This is the influence of modernisation, and some Hill people refer to them jokingly as pahari foreigners.

- Despite the spreading of education, Hill people have not really benefited because the institutions have been set up in towns while most

indigenous people live in villages. The Hill people, therefore, allege that the location of these institutions suggests that they have been set up to cater to the needs of settler Bengalis.

### Bridging the gap

An interesting point to be noted is that all the young indigenous people, when asked whether changes were necessary for modernisation, answered in affirmative. Though they admit that the influence of modernisation can be negative or positive, there is no denying the fact that the advancement of technology can improve their own community and lead to the overall development of the country as well. Moreover, they want to work with the mainstream people in parallel if they are not discriminated against. They are ready to face any type of competition if they get proper opportunities in all sectors of the society. But, their basic rights need to be ensured first.

Following are some of the steps that have already taken by the government, or are going to be executed, to lessen the gap between the ethnic communities and the Bengali people.

### Towards dialogue, peace and development

- The overall situation of the indigenous people of the country is of serious concern, and calls for concerted action through dialogue, mutual respect, and trust. Communication has already developed by the setting-up of mobile phone and internet services, which they were long seeking for.
- The government-indigenous dialogue on the PRSP is a positive example to be emulated. There may be differences between the two, but the gap can definitely be narrowed down.
- Greater devolution of authority to the hill councils, and direct representation of the plains adivasi (indigenous community) in the special affairs division that deals with adivasi issues will accelerate development in the long-neglected adivasi areas.
- Certain sections of the government



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occasionally react in an abrasive manner to adivasi protests against the perceived violation of their rights. It is a norm in healthy and democratic societies for such complaints to be made, and our government should not feel that the people who so complain are acting against the interest of the state. "All peoples have the right of self-expression. By virtue of this right they freely express their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development." This right cannot be denied to indigenous peoples, including those in Bangladesh.

We need to find out whether modernisation can really help the ethnic community or not. Whether they are really integrating technological facilities is also a big question. Technology is a predominant force. The ethnic com-

munities are being alienated in the name of technology and modernisation, but they should not be. Whether they are really prepared or able to accept the technology should be considered. If they remain only with their tradition then they will remain as backward communities in the use of technology.

It is truly a struggle between traditionalism and modernism. The Bengalis can also incorporate some of the indigenous cultural or technological practices into their own, which is called shared learning. The government as well as the international community must take effective steps so that the ethnic communities can work with the flow of modern technology, but not beyond sustainable development.

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MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/DRK NEWS



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# Why Indonesia will beat the bombers

A combination of broad economic and social strategies, but with attention to local detail, alongside the sensible security policies already developed should work, whilst building and maintaining strong public support via democratic mechanisms.

TERRY LACEY

THE Jakarta bombers had a temporary negative impact, hitting tourism more than investment or the economy. Before the glass was cleared up from the two hotels, the crowds were back in the Jakarta shopping malls. M.S. Hidayat, Chairman of the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce, said the bombings would not impact heavily on Indonesian business but that "A quick solution to the case (would be) key to ensuring long-term stability in the business climate," (Jakarta Post 24.07.09).

Indonesia shows that once economic and social development combined with political reform gain sufficient momentum, then hard-line Islamist militants have much less to work with.

In Indonesia political Islam has allied itself with a reforming government and can fight corruption and for economic

strengthening of local government, therefore, become essential in rural areas for security reasons as well as to ensure economic development -- two sides of the same coin.

The main enemy is underdevelopment, poor education, rural backwardness and the vulnerability of village-based parochial loyalties and kinship links, when local traditional or religious leaderships are weak.

The growth of Islamic-derived deviant cults, including organised criminal "pyramid" money-collecting schemes, reflect some exploitation of oversimplistic loyalties to Islam and Muslim culture, in the absence of stronger leaderships, undermining legitimate religious fund-raising.

These trends reflect some loss of authority and outreach by the two main Muslim mass organisations, the Nahdlatul Ulama and the Muhammadiyah, both of which claim

unrealistically large memberships. Local state-backed community-based regeneration, perhaps backed by an expansion of shariah banking and local shariah lending groups in support of small enterprises and social infrastructure, would have a stabilising effect.

An increasingly fractured disaggregated society is undergoing rapid economic and social change, with many competing social trends and interests, alongside the wearing down of the extended family and the undermining of traditional middle-aged leadership structures.

A predominantly young population seeks new social and cultural outlets prompted by the increasingly pervasive influence of television, pop music and pop culture and electronic networking, increasingly propelled by mobile phones and hand-held devices which the poor can now afford, as well as village internet centres.

The economic model built by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is achieving small-scale redistribution effects, but on a massive scale, backed by a huge state budget, state-backed projects and state-owned enterprises, countering the negative impacts of the global downturn.

This has been enough to keep the

economy growing at about 4.5% this year, and the number of people in poverty or unemployment falling, but the country needs a growth rate of at least 6.5% to make serious inroads into both problems.

Economic success helps, but the way has to be open to political change and bureaucratic reforms, so that marginalised local groups can become included rather than remaining excluded, avoiding local power vacuums or discontent.

The targets of the bombers and their backers are likely to be increasingly economic since economic success provides the main parameters for their defeat.

A combination of broad economic and social strategies, but with attention to local detail, alongside the sensible security policies already developed should work, whilst building and maintaining strong public support via democratic mechanisms.

Other countries should look at this Indonesian model, which has tackled local conflicts successfully and might be helpful elsewhere.

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De-motivation is the way to stop them.