

Counting the indigenous people in

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THE finance division of the ministry of finance is now working to finalise the national budget for FY 2010-11, which will be placed before the Parliament in June. The finance minister has concluded pre-budget consultations with the chairman and members of the Parliamentary Standing Committees, representatives from Economic Reporters Forum and NGOs, editors of electronic and print media, economists and professionals and secretaries of all ministries and divisions. According to the web-site of the ministry of finance, the finance division has also met all the line ministries and divisions to finalise the budget proposals.

As the time of declaration of the national budget comes nearer, people from all walks of life are expressing their desires and expectations to be reflected in the proposed budget. Expectations from different pressure groups, including women rights activists, marginalised professional groups, farmers, disabled people and others have already been aired. But the issue of proper representation of indigenous people in the national budget is seldom raised.

With a population of approximately 140 million, Bangladesh is a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-lingual country. Although a majority of the country's population belongs to one ethnic and linguistic group, about 1.2% of the population are indigenous, living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and in the plain land regions with their distinct languages, scripts, literature, religions, numerical systems and cultures. At present, there are more than 45 indigenous groups (adibashis) in Bangladesh.

No ethnographic survey has been carried out so far in the history of Bangladesh. However, according to the 1991 population census, the "ethnic population" of Bangladesh is 1.2 million. Unfortunately,

the constitution of Bangladesh has no formal provision and policy regarding the indigenous peoples of the country.

Only the "backward section of the society" has been emphasised, rather than a clear indication of the indigenous community, in Article 28 (4) of our Constitution: "Nothing in this Article shall prevent the state from making special provision in favour of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens."

Although the ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) affairs was formed soon after the 1997 CHT Accord was signed, there has been no further government initiative to expand the scope of the ministry to include other indigenous groups like the Garo, Khasi, Manipuri, Santal, Munda, Mahato, Oraon, Buno, Mahali, Rajbangshi, Bhumij, Bagdi, Rakhine or others in the plain lands of North Bengal, Tangail-Mymensingh-Sylhet region, Khulna-Jessore-Satkhira region or the coastal areas.

Abul Mal Abdul Muhit, the minister of finance, while delivering the budget speech in June 2009 observed: "We believe in harmony amidst all the religions, castes and racial denominations. This is why we wish to eradicate all sorts of violence, discriminatory behaviour and oppression against the minority community forever. We would ensure political, administrative, legal and social security to attain this goal.

In case any communal violence takes place, we would make provision for stringent punishment by promulgation of draconian laws. We would make special provisions for preservation of traditional or hereditary rights of the indigenous people in the forest areas. We would ensure special opportunities for religious and ethnic minorities as well as indigenous people in employment sector and educational institutions." (Clause 256)

"We would implement the CHT peace accord fully. We would preserve the distinct character of the language, literature,



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culture and lifestyle of the ethnic minorities, indigenous and other groups of people by recognising their rights and undertake extended measures in development of backward regions of the country, and would implement priority based programs for balanced development." (Clause 257)

The atrocities in Baghaihat, Sajek Union of Rangamati in CHT in February of this year seriously question the peace initiatives and development endeavours for the indigenous people. How can the government and the civil society be expected to work together for a better environment, peace and prosperity if the minimum requirements for stability and ethnic reciprocity are not fulfilled?

This is why the concerned indigenous people and all the development organisations and individual activists working to promote a better understanding on this issue today wish to raise the valid claim that the government should be more reflective in implementation of the peace treaty in the CHT region, create the proper environment for peace and stability in the trouble prone CHT region, allocate more fund for indigenous people in the coming national budget and extend the concerned ministry's area of work for the indigenous people in the plain land regions of Bangladesh.

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Dowry death



Worth her weight in jewellery?

Accepting and demanding a dowry has become an accepted norm in our society. From upper-class to middle-class, and the poor people in villages, dowry is given to the groom's family. It determines a bride's worth to that particular family.

ZEENAT KHAN

ON June 3rd, *The Daily Star* article "A wife's darkest hour" chronicled a wife's brutal murder at the hands of her husband for her inability to bring in the dowry which was negotiated during the marriage proposal. She was set on fire by her greedy husband. Such monstrous acts and gruesome murders are being carried out with impunity in our country.

Many Asian countries, including Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, follow the practice of dowry. From

the moment a baby girl is born, especially in a low-income family, worries start that one day a dowry demand will have to be met. Society often undermines the role of a woman. The social customs in Bangladesh are such that in the 21st century a husband consumed by greed can brutally murder his wife when her family cannot meet the dowry demand.

The Daily Star article's author emphasised that if girls got higher education it would make them assertive and independent. Undoubtedly getting an education will enhance women empower-

ment. Will that eliminate the dowry practice?

The dowry system has been in place for centuries. It is essentially a contract between the father of the bride and the father of the groom before a marriage takes place. Marriage is a social contract between a man and a woman where they promise in the name of God to love and honour one another. By taking dowry one undermines the entire sanctity of the institution of marriage.

Accepting and demanding a dowry has become an accepted norm in our society. From upper-class to middle-class, and the poor people in villages, dowry is given to the groom's family. It determines a bride's worth to that particular family. In the villages, if a woman is not pretty enough, the demand seems to be higher. In many of the families the dowry demand causes an unusual and enormous burden. Poor families often become destitute in providing a dowry for the daughter in order to marry her off.

We read and hear about horrific dowry-related deaths in Bangladesh. Other than greed, poverty also plays a big role in accepting a dowry payment. Some people might argue that for a poor family dowry is a means to an end.

What troubles me is that when a bride's family is unable to pay the agreed upon amount the bride becomes a victim of abuse, torture and, in some cases, faces death. Unusual cruelty is bestowed upon them, from burning of their faces with acid to heavy beating, gang rape and other unimaginable mental and psychological punishment. This is happening today in Bangladesh.

Why is anything not being done about it? Newspapers and other media agencies are reporting dowry deaths. The public is well aware of it. But the public scrutiny is not strong enough to have the dowry system totally abolished. In 1980, our government passed the dowry prohibition law by stating that acceptance of dowry was illegal. This law is not followed in practice.

It is well documented that since the independence of Bangladesh the dowry problem has become more acute. Despite

the passing of such laws dowry related violence has increased in Bangladesh. There is an unwritten custom where a new bride from all kinds of families and backgrounds will bring with her money, goods such as furniture, watch, motorbike, ornaments or property for her husband.

The ironic thing is that the dowry-related deaths are caused by the people -- their husbands and in-laws -- who are supposed to protect them after the marriage. Dowry deaths are nothing short of savagery. It again comes down to our society being patriarchal, where women are devalued even when we are standing on the threshold of modernisation and claim to live in a civilised world.

Sometimes a dowry agreement has to be fulfilled because that particular family's honour and social position are at stake. Dowry equals wealth, and it becomes a status symbol. For an uneducated girl a dowry payment can be up to Tk 20,000 but an educated girl often has to bring a much higher dowry to get the right bridegroom.

This is undoubtedly a disgraceful custom. Dissatisfied families inflict enormous pain and suffering on the bride. Sometimes such dissatisfaction motivates them to murder the bride. In 2004, a bride was burnt to death on the twenty-second day of her marriage in Chapainawabganj.

In order to eradicate such social evil the families with marriageable daughters have to band together. The girls need to be educated and self-confident so that they do not feel like a commodity that is negotiated and contracted with the grooms' family. The law should be strictly enforced.

Media can play a pivotal role here by keeping the pressure on. Dowry-related violence should be widely reported. Being pro-active is the key to enforcing this law. New legislation making women's education compulsory should be supported. We need to also increase our level of social awareness to rid our society of such an archaic practice. The subtle form of discrimination against women has to stop.

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Terms of trade

Bangladesh has nothing to gain from TIFA but she may lose substantially. RMG exporters to US are paying 4% more than others to enter the US market. Though there is mention of duty-free entry in the TIFA draft we are not sure about any gain for Bangladesh.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

THE US has been trying to conclude a treaty with Bangladesh on economic, political and military interests since 2001. In the past, it failed twice -- once during BNP led regime of 2001-06 and again during the caretaker government (2007-08). On both occasions it failed due to peoples' opposition.

Immediately after assumption of power by the present government the US has started pressuring the government for the agreement. It was recently disclosed by the minister for commerce that conclusion of a treaty is at the penultimate stage. Strangely enough, the people are not aware of the development of such a sensitive issue in a democratic country.

Analysts consider the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) as more than a trade pact. It involves US geo-political strategy. Ever since the Chinese communist revolution, i.e. the decade of the '50s, Bangladesh has been important to the US from the point of view of the US policy of encircling China.

This policy could be pursued till the liberation of Bangladesh through Pakistan-US South East Asia Treaty Organization (Seato). After the liberation of Bangladesh, the US could not continue to pursue the policy due to development of USSR-Bangladesh friendship.

It appears that US has failed to bring the countries with stronger economies under this treaty. These countries are Canada, China, EU and India. Truly speaking, TIFA is for countries that are weak politically, economically and militarily.

Among the countries brought under the treaty are Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, New Zealand etc. (South East Asia and Pacific area countries), Algeria, Bahrain, Tunisia, United Arab Emirate, Egypt, Georgia, Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia etc. (Middle Eastern countries), Uruguay (Latin America), Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, etc. (Africa). If closely examined, it will be clear as to why US is so interested in bilateral treaties like TIFA. This treaty is directly linked to US geo-political and foreign policy.

As per WTO, Bangladesh, an LDC, will continue to remain outside the Trademark, Copyright, Patent and Intellectual Property rights till 2013. With regard to the pharmaceutical sector, Bangladesh will enjoy this privilege up to 2016. If TIFA is concluded, Bangladesh will be compelled to pay the mother companies.

In the IT sector alone, Bangladesh will have to pay around \$500 million under the Intellectual Property Rights. Furthermore, Bangladesh is occupying the top position among the Asian countries in indulging in software piracy. If TIFA is concluded, the local price of computers may rise substantially.

Through this treaty, US may gain absolute control over our oil and gas. With the opening of service and trade sectors to foreign investment local investors will face unequal competition from foreigners in critical sectors like fuel, telecommunication, education and health. It may be stated in this regard that about 21.4% of the labour force is engaged in these sectors, and they contribute to the extent of about 41.37% to the local production.

Bangladesh has nothing to gain from TIFA but she may lose substantially. RMG exporters to US are paying 4% more than others to enter the US market. Though there is mention of duty-free entry in the TIFA draft we are not sure about any gain for Bangladesh.

The European Union recently withdrew restrictions on the sale of genetically modified organisms. This means flooding of the market with junk food. In Europe, the population is much smaller than it is in the third world. Bangladeshis, being poor, will rush for cheaper junk food, resulting in crippling of the poor.

In Bangladesh, multinational companies have destroyed thousands of local varieties of paddy seeds. TIFA will increase the danger. We apprehend gradual destruction of our local industries.

On TIFA, both AL and BNP hold the same view. We hope that they will not compromise with any foreign power on anything detrimental to the interest of the country and its people.

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