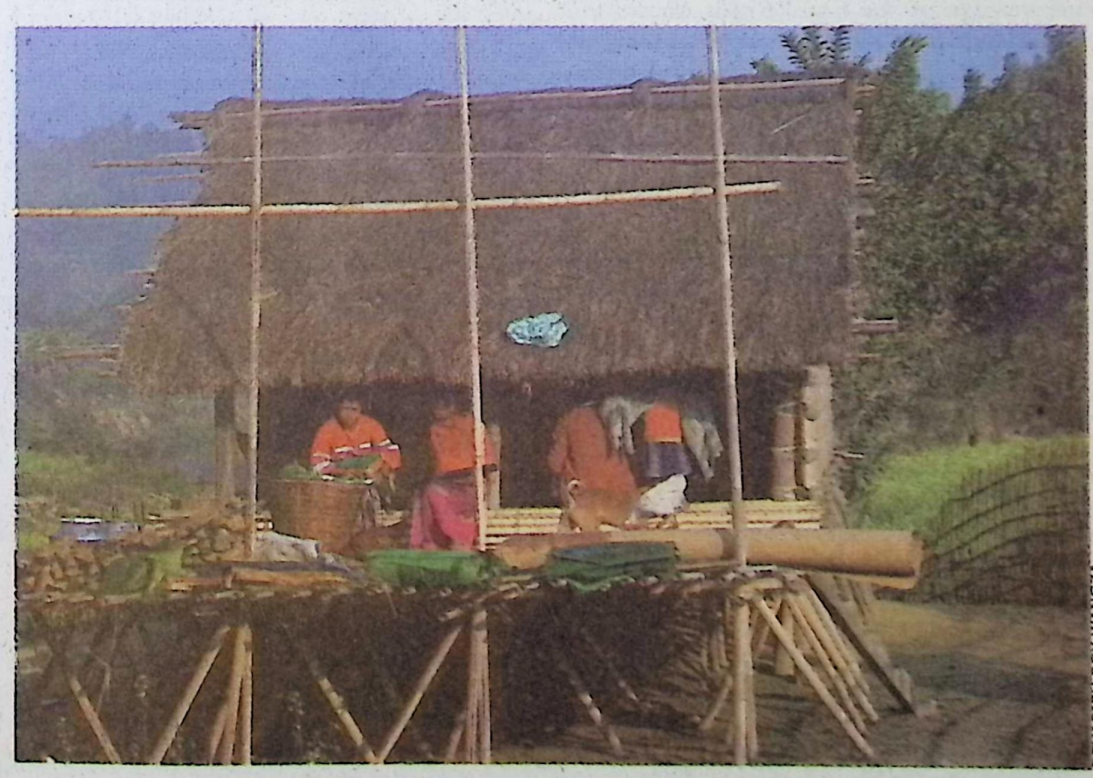
Bengal in 1905? What we therefore need to espouse is a national identity that asserts its uniqueness in positive terms, based upon the multicultural heritage of the peoples and communities of Bangladesh, and not an identity that focuses upon the non-Muslimness or non-Bangaleeness. This way we get out of the quagmire of the false dichotomy of Bangalee versus Muslim. In other words, what many in Bangladesh -- including Adibashis -- espouse is a multicultural state that discards the ideals of the Westphalian nation state as much as it rejects the medieval theocratic model of statehood.

The Adibashi vision

The indigenous peoples of Bangladesh, including the *Paharis* of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and the Adibashis of the plains regions, dream of a Bangladesh in which their distinctive identities are constitutionally recognised and protected. They wish to reshape the country so that they are a part of the structure and process of state-led governance and development instead of being mere spectators, or worse, victims. Apart from their cultural identities based upon strong collectivist traditions, their traditional dependence upon, and stewardship roles in managing, natural resources and eco systems, and self-governance and internal dispute resolution based upon customary law, indigenous peoples the world over share one historical experience: they are one segment of humanity that has had little or no role in designing the modern states' administrative architecture and resource ownership regimes. In other words, indigenous peoples did not frame the 'rules of the game' in the modern state (unlike in pre-modern indigenous civilisations like that of the Mayas, Aztecs, Kiratas, Sakyas, Boroks), and not unsurprisingly, remain among the most marginalised groups with regard to access to education, healthcare, drinking water (now a globally recognised human right), sanitation, electricity, communications, capital and market access. Therefore, in order to make the 'playing field' somewhat more 'level', indigenous peoples are demanding a say in state-led governance and development, in order to rid themselves of their subaltern status. Thereby, they are not seeking to hegemonise state power (a tall order, you might say, especially in states like Bangladesh, wherein they are not only microscopic minorities but are also socio-politically and economically disadvantaged) but are merely seeking a right to exist with their identities, and to be able to speak, and to be heard.

Constitutional recognition of Adibashis and safeguard provisions

Ever since 1972, Adibashis have been seeking constitutional recognition, something they lost in the constitutional reform processes of 1956, 1962 and 1972, wherein they were not consulted.



DEVASISH ROY WANGZA