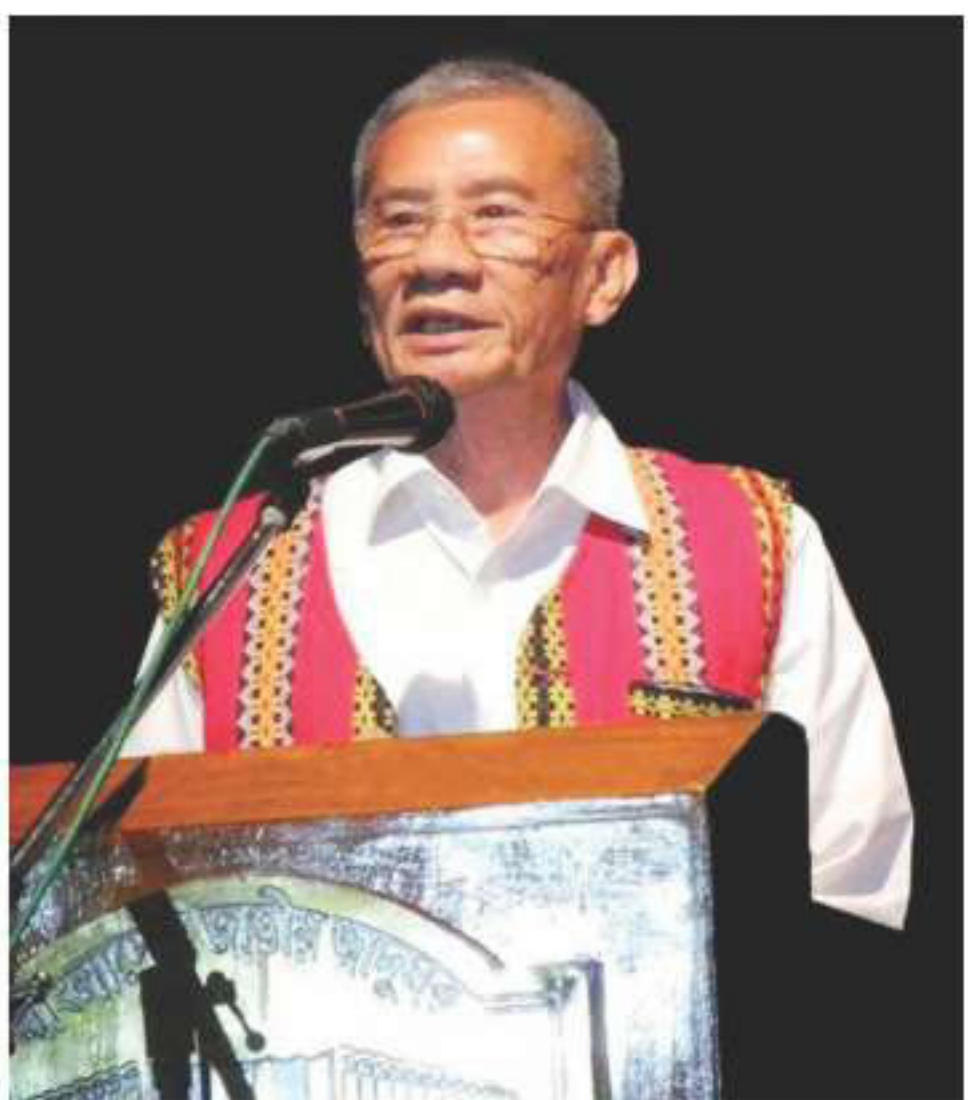


INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

"Human rights violations against adivasis are increasing at an alarming rate"

Jyotirindra Bodhipriya (Santu) Larma, President of Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS), speaks to Sushmita S Preetha of The Daily Star about the dire state of the adivasis in the country and challenges of the adivasi movement at large.

In recent years, the government's insistence that there are no adivasis in Bangladesh has given rise to a lot of outrage amongst adivasis and their allies. How important is constitutional recognition in the greater struggle for establishing adivasi rights? It is very unfortunate that in the 5th amendment to the Constitution of Bangladesh, the adivasis have not been recognised but rather been incorporated as "tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities" in Section 23 (A). Meanwhile, Section 6(2) states that "the citizens of Bangladesh will be called Bengalis". This all but erases us. Every year, we see debates regarding the adivasi identity, and the idea that there is no adivasi in Bangladesh has been disseminated among administrative and government levels. There have been attempts to spread this through the media as well, but we have been happy to see that most media continues to recognise us as adivasis. Time and again, we have said that the adivasi population has the right to self-identify. It is a human right. No one can change, dictate or impose an identity on members of an ethnic or national group. This is not just a theoretical debate – there are repercussions on the ground as well. Land grabbing and land disputes are taking place at an unprecedented rate. On the other hand, because of this confusion at the national level, a negative message has spread to the district levels, as a result of which human rights violations against adivasis are increasing at an alarming



Santu Larma

rate. NGOs are facing difficulties in working for adivasi rights. Land grabbing has remained a bleak reality in the lives of adivasis, whether on the hill tracts or in the plain lands. In many cases, the government itself has initiated the process of land acquisition in the name of development. What is your assessment of the situation? There seems to be a carnival of land grabbing in the country. Land is the main source of livelihood for the indigenous communi-

ties, but influential Bangalis are taking over their land from them forcefully on a continuous basis. And the government, who is supposed to protect adivasi rights, is turning a blind eye towards these, or worse still, in many cases, actually assisting the land grabbers either directly or indirectly. Adivasis are losing land not just to the land grabbers, but as a result of many development projects, including national park, eco-park, dams, medical college and so on. The situation is also grave in the plain lands, e.g. in Srimangal's Nahar Panji, which has been home to the Khashiyas for generations and generations, land has been leased out in the name of a tea garden, and when they protested, they were attacked by goons and harassed in different ways.

The government has totally ignored the right of adivasis to their ancestral land as recognised by international laws. In 2014, 3,911 acres of land have been acquired by governmental and non-governmental institutions and individuals, and an additional 84,647 acres are in the process of being acquired. The Forest Department is in the process of acquiring 218,000 acres of adivasi jum and mouza lands having declared them as "reserved forests". BGB, too, is acquiring land in violation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council Act, 1998. In the plain lands, 102 adivasi families have been evicted, and another 886 families are under threat; 89 families were attacked by land grabbers. False

cases were filed against 150 adivasis who protested the land grabbing. Violence against women and human rights violations in all forms as a result of land-related disputes are also increasing.

18 years on, the pledges made in the Peace Accord are yet to be fulfilled. You've begun your non-cooperation movement as a protest against the government's refusal to make a roadmap. What is the next step of the movement?

Although 18 years have passed, the central pledges of the Accord are nowhere near implemented, primarily: retaining the special characteristics of the Jumma areas; making the regional council and three hill district councils functional; resolving land-related disputes; rehabilitation of internally displaced people and refugees; withdraw 'Operation Uttaran' and all temporary camps from the CHT; rehabilitating the Bangali settlers outside of the CHT; amending existing laws to reflect the provisions in the Peace Accord, and so on.

Last November, we had given an ultimatum to the government to give a road map for effective implementation of the Accord, but we did not receive any positive response. Our movement is underway; but that is not to say that we are not in conversation with the government. The reality always dictates what form the movement takes.

Would you say that the lack of unity

amongst the adivasis has weakened the adivasi cause?

I do not agree that there is a lack of unity amongst the adivasis. There will always be divisions among people, whether that be on the basis of class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, etc. But as far as the question of unity or solidarity is concerned, you cannot always reach a 100 percent consensus. Is there 100 percent agreement among the Bangladeshis on any issue? Different parties have their own ideologies, that are only to be expected. Why would the adivasis be any different? But I would argue that more or less we have been united; otherwise how have we waged a movement for so long?

What part, if any, can the mainstream human rights organisations or civil society play in assisting the adivasi movement?

They can do a lot, but what we have observed is that the number of people who are willing to risk everything for the adivasi cause is very limited. Sure, there are those who are involved, who give lectures in seminars, raising awareness on the issue, or who go stand besides the adivasi victims in case of human rights violations and exert pressure on the administration. But it's not enough, in the grand scheme of things. So far, we have not seen any effective long-term plan on any party to wage a movement for adivasi rights, not from BNP or AL, for sure, but also not from any of the leftist or anti-imperialist parties.

TO SAY OR NOT TO SAY...

MAHMUDUL SUMON

IN recent years, a debate has ensued as to whether one should call non-Bangalis living in Bangladesh as adivasis or "small ethnic groups" (Khudranri-gosthi, as suggested in a recent law).

On the one hand, there are writers and academicians who argue that calling these groups of people adivasis (the term of course has this connotation of autochthony; my emphasis) is wrong. They try to bring in issues of history, usually trying to show that they are like many other recent migrants, coming from adjacent regions to the areas where they are now located in Bangladesh. On the other hand, some argue that these groups of people are distinctly different from the mainstream Bangali people of Bangladesh. They are different in terms of culture, language and religion and are often discriminated by the majoritarian culture and population. This latter group claims that, by definition of the UN and some other international agencies such as the World Bank, they fall into the category of "adivasi"/indigenous etc.

However, my purpose of writing today has nothing to do with proving any of these sides wrong. Although I admit that there can be various ways to look at this issue, it is not always healthy to resort to a theory of conspiracy when it comes to the question of how we can address the rights of a substantially large group of population who are not necessarily Bangalis but nevertheless are citizens of this country. But this is precisely what I see in many responses on this issue; especially people who do not support the term adivasi or take the official line in this regard, easily fall prey to such conspiracy theories.

I have often wondered what this debate has given to the marginalised population of our country who are not necessarily Bangalis (i.e. for example the Santals, Mundas or Garos). The debate has become elitist and theoretical in nature. One can, of course, bring in current and fashionable theories of ethnicity and identity formation to show that in a way this demand for naming the people adivasi (as a sort of umbrella term for all the different groups of people and ethnicities in Bangladesh who do not call themselves Bangalis) has over the years appealed to the middle class, NGOised subject who want to continue with this term – adivasi - for certain benefits in an international level. When much of the policies we see today are the result of various trans-statal discourses (MDGs, for example), one can always say what's wrong with this demand which is imagined somewhere in New York or Geneva for that matter (often dubbed as the capital of NGOs of the world). One can, of course, say this as long as the "funds" are "flowing."

On the other hand, one can take up the issue in hand more independently. The state can always – to prove its existence if nothing else – say that this definition of adivasi is wrong and hence, exercise its sovereign power. In fact in regard to this particular issue, this is exactly the case where the state is trying to show some of its power and resisting

the transnational "indigenous slot."

This debate I must say is not original perse. Some renowned scholars differed on the applicability of this term for Asian countries. The UN has also found it difficult to arrive at a universal definition, which applies to both settler colonies such as the US, Canada and Australia and continents like Asia and Africa.

But it appears to me that down here in Dhaka, people are spending too much time, energy on this debate. No matter what you'd like to call these groups (my personal preference is to call them by their specific ethnonym, i.e. Santals or Mundas), can anyone deny their existence? We all know that there are groups of people and communities in Bangladesh who do not refer themselves as Bangalis but - to name a few groups - Santals, Oraon, Chakmas and by many other groups. These people were born in this country; the ones who have had the opportunity to go to school often were taught in the Bangali education system (since there were no schools in their own language). Often these groups of people are bilingual and at times trilingual (when English is accounted for; in some areas in the north-western Bangladesh). And of course, the majority of these groups are rooted in the agricultural production of this country

The state of Bangladesh needs to develop concerted policies for these groups of population of the country. The state needs to develop plans for their education; it would be optimum if at least a part of their education was in their mother tongue. It should look into their unique livelihood practices. In areas where it is needed, it should create favourable scopes for affirmative actions for these groups.

Unfortunately, the state of Bangladesh has been criticised for denying these people and communities. NGOs, on the other hand, have constantly blamed the state for not acknowledging their demand. The state must come up with very precise policies for the betterment of the marginalised sections of these populations, for whom naming may not be the only issue. For them, education is important, job creation is important. Continuous efforts to support and restore their livelihood practices are important. I do not see any honest communication between the two debating groups.

It's saddening that over the last many years, we have not been able to clarify this simple thing: that ethnicity and citizenships are two different things. My Chakma friend from Khagrachari is a citizen of Bangladesh (like me) but we have different identities as far as our ethnicity is concerned (I am a Bangali, whereas she is a Chakma). Simply, there is a need for a slot in many forms produced by the state to accommodate this information (for passport or National ID applications etc). A slot for information on ethnicity/ethnic origin where some will write Santal and another will write Garo and someone like me will write Bangali. For this to materialise, one does not need a lot of funding. A clear-headed intervention from the state should be enough!

The writer is a PhD and an Associate Professor of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University.



The business of 'othering' and 'othering' as business

HANA SHAMS AHMED

RECENTLY, at a talk on political stalemates at the Shilpakala Academy organised by a private university, a university student from the audience questioned the validity of my critique of the military's involvement in developing tourism in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). He asked me why it was a problem for the military to be involved with developing tourism if they were doing a good job of it.

"Good for whom?" is of course a fundamental question here. I've visited the Nilgiri Resort in Bandarban. It is quite a popular place to visit for mostly Dhaka-based tourists. At a height of 2400 feet from sea-level, it's a beautiful spot where you can see the clouds gently flowing below you. But the CHT is not just a beautiful hilly area where season tourists can, for some time, escape the rat race of the city. It also happens to be home to thousands of Jumma people of 11 different ethnicities who continue to lose their lands in many different ways since the government deployed the army and brought in 400,000 settlers in the late 1970s.

In 2007, land rights activist and chairperson of Sualok Union Parishad, Ranglai Mro, was taken away from his home and allegedly tortured by the military. He was leading a campaign against illegal acquisition of Jumma people's land in Sualok mouza in Bandarban. The torture caused permanent damage to his heart and there

is no visible campaign to protect the land of the Mro people in Bandarban anymore. Earlier, Kalpana Chakma, only 21 years old, wrote in her diary and in letters to her comrades of how she feared militarisation would suppress the campaign of the Jumma people's movement, and she disappeared in 1996. Her brother, an eye-witness to her abduction, claimed to have seen security forces take his sister away. Justice still awaits the family members of Kalpana Chakma.

Reng Young Mro Nangchen writes about what actually happens when land is taken over for tourism in his article "Unnoyon o amader nirob prostan" (Development and Our Silent Departure). He talks about how development and tourism forces Mro communities out of their homes, their mouzas, and sometimes, even their country. Not only does mindless development and tourism leave people homeless, it also causes damage to the critical environmental balance, affecting all citizens of the country. But there is very little information and understanding of what price humanity is paying as a result. This inhumane situation of evicted Mro families begs the fundamental question – why is the tourism and development needs of the city people more important than the homes, lives and livelihoods of local Mros? Reng Young writes: "The city boys come for their outings in their coloured glasses and start jumping up and down in excitement when they see us as if they have seen some neanderthals."

The horrors of Sajek are recent history. In April 2008, about 70 homes of Jummas in

about seven villages were burnt down. Prior to the incident, Jummas in the area had been protesting the illegal settlement of outsider Bangalis who were brought in to build roads and be part of the national development project. This attack failed to subdue the movement, and so once again, a mass arson attack took place. In 2010, about 500 homes of mostly Jummas were razed to the ground. Both the attacks were covered widely by the media. However, the media's tunnel vision meant that it failed to follow up the news and look at the wider aspects of these attacks. Fast forward to 2015, and you can now reserve an air-conditioned room at the newly-formed Sajek Resort for Tk. 15,000 if you're an "Other Valued Citizen". Sajek would be the Switzerland of Bangladesh, someone had once mentioned somewhere.

The stories of Ranglai Mro and Kalpana Chakma, the eviction of Jumma people from their homes to make life comfortable for urbanites, fails to strike a chord with us. Perhaps the reason why the university student's question mentioned at the beginning of this article received such wide applause from other students at the auditorium is because the military in the CHT is still 'our' [read: Bangali] military which thinks about tourism transaction and 'our' pleasure. The Jummas are just a blind spot in this transaction.

The writer is an author and a human rights activist.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

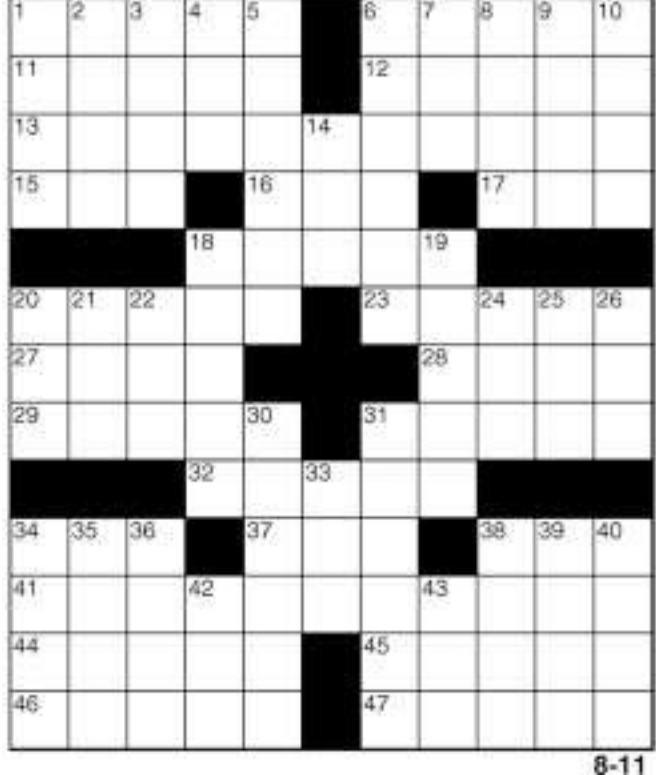
- 1 Some soft drinks
- 6 Speedy
- 11 Set off
- 12 Spring up
- 13 Undecided person
- 15 Conclusion
- 16 Knee protector
- 17 Hankinger
- 18 Prom rentals
- 20 Throw away
- 23 Factory worker
- 27 "Moby Dick" captain
- 28 Excellent

DOWN

- 1 Casual eatery
- 2 Ready for business
- 3 Touch down
- 4 Curved path
- 5 Barker's come-on
- 6 Corporate shark
- 7 Op or pop
- 8 Compassion
- 9 Knowing phrase
- 10 Bruce of "Ne-braska"
- 14 Jazz horn
- 18 Restaurant unit
- 19 Until now
- 20 Plopped down
- 21 Greek's X
- 22 Lab animal
- 24 Sizeable

ACROSS

- 25 Small bill
- 26 Slugger Williams
- 30 Studio stands
- 31 Negligent
- 33 Oxygen, for one
- 34 Herring's kin
- 35 Vatican VIP
- 36 Surrounding glow
- 38 Flag feature
- 39 Superman's alter ego
- 40 Ticks off
- 42 Confessional topic
- 43 Binary base



Yesterday's answer

DELL	WEBS
CILIA	ALoud
ADAMS	RINGO
TYPIST	NAG
COST	OFFERS
HUE	PURITY
SIREN	
COOLIT	OAT
LYNXES	TRIO
ABE	TAOIST
MOMMA	STOLE
BRAIN	TALES
GNAT	ALES