INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

# Fight for indigenous rights in Bangladesh continues

PALLAB CHAKMA

*Despite repeated promises by successive governments, a full implementation of the accord has proven to be elusive. Major provisions of the accord, including land disputes resolution and devolution of power to the local bodies, are yet to be fulfilled.*

THE United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted on September 13, 2007 at the 61st session of the General Assembly in the UN headquarters, New York City, United States. The UNDRIP is a landmark accomplishment for the member-states of the UN recognising the rights of the world's indigenous population. The declaration addresses both individual and collective rights, cultural rights and identity, rights to education, health, employment, language and others. It outlaws discrimination against the indigenous peoples and promotes their full and effective participation in all matters that concern them. It also ensures their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own visions of economic, social and cultural development. The declaration explicitly encourages harmonious and cooperative relations between the states and indigenous peoples.

The historical subjugation and injustices faced by these peoples, systematic exploration of their lands, territories and resources, non-recognition of their distinct identities, traditions, cultures and customs, lack of political participation and engagement in decision-making, and denial of access to basic services were, among others, compounding factors that motivated the member-states to be engaged in the two-decade-long negotiation for framing the declaration.

During its adoption, the then Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warmly welcomed the declaration, calling it "a triumph for indigenous peoples around the world." He further noted that "this marks a historic moment when UN Member States and indigenous peoples reconciled with their painful histories and resolved to move forward together on the path of human rights, justice and development for all."

As we step in the 10th year since the UNDRIP was adopted by the General Assembly, we must recognise that the declaration is the most comprehensive international agreement on the rights of indigenous peoples. The four countries (United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) that voted against the declaration have reversed their position, and now support the declaration. Bangladesh is one of the 11 countries that abstained and it has not changed its position yet. Nevertheless, at the domestic level, its top political leadership has promised several times to work together with the indigenous communities for the implementation of the UNDRIP.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

**The aftermath of the massive arson attacks in Longadu, where between 110 to 200 homes were torched, still haunts the people of Rangamati.**

It is estimated that there are approximately 370 million indigenous peoples in the world, belonging to 5,000 different groups spread over almost 90 countries. It is believed that 70 percent of the world's indigenous peoples live in Asia. According to Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, in Bangladesh, there are around three million indigenous people living both in the plains and the hills.

Over the years, the indigenous communities' struggle for their rights got the attention of the country's media and civil society organisations, and to some extent, support from mainstream political parties, mainly the Leftists. On the other hand, the government has also taken some positive steps for the betterment of the indigenous people (although it prefers to use the term "ethnic minority"), and recognised their rights through different plans and policy statements, including the Education Policy, the Tribal Health, Nutrition and Population Plan (THNPP), Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act 2010, National Women Development Policy 2011, Amendment of the CHT Land Disputes Resolution Commission Act of 2001, etc. It also took steps to establish CHT Complex in Dhaka, conduct language surveys, and introduce mother tongue-based pre-primary education in five indigenous languages. However, proper implementation of these steps and policies remains a challenge.

The 7th Five Year Plan (FY 2016-2020) rightly illustrates the existing status of the indigenous people by stating "The ethnic communities in Bangladesh are the most deprived of economic, social, cultural and political rights, mainly due to their ethnic status. Ethnic identities are creating barriers to ethnic minority people's inclusion in wider social networks" (Planning Commission 2015). Lack of proper recognition in the constitution, non-recognition of their traditional and customary land rights, denial of access to justice, lack of proper representation in the decision-making, etc., are also some of the problems facing these communities.

In recent years, members of the indigenous communities have faced widespread land alienation and different forms of violence and harassment. The recent arson attacks in Longadu, alleged extrajudicial killing of Romel Chakma, the forest department's declaration of part of Madhupur as reserve forest, Khasi people's land disputes in Sylhet's Nahar Punjee, and the case of Santal farmers of Sahebganj-Bagda Farm area are some vivid examples. These incidents show the vulnerability of the indigenous people.

The CHT Accord, signed in 1997, is considered one of the constructive measures taken by the government to address the socio-economic and political problems of CHT. However, despite repeated promises by successive governments, a full implementation of the accord has proven to be elusive. Major provisions of the accord, including land disputes resolution, withdrawal of temporary military camps, and devolution of power to the local bodies, are yet to be fulfilled.

In the 7th Five Year Plan, the government expressed its "strong commitment" to consider implementing UNDRIP and ratifying ILO Convention no. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. Almost the same words were used in the 6th Five Year Plan. Unfortunately, no significant changes have been noticed on the ground. We want to believe that this time the government will come forward to make good on its promises.

Currently, Bangladesh is on its way to develop the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Until now, the indigenous people haven't been consulted and engaged in this process, although a meaningful engagement in national development is one of the major components of the UNDRIP. Also, the spirit of the sustainable development agenda 2030 is "leave no one behind".

So it's really important that the indigenous people of the country are engaged in the SDGs, their voices are heard, and their rights are respected, protected and fulfilled in spirit of the UNDRIP.

# Bangladesh's aspirations for green growth

*The journey is not an easy one but we can get there if the people, and the public and private sectors work together*

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SALEEMUL HUQ

THE global development discourse is constantly evolving over time. Sometimes we use different terms to mean the same thing. The buzzwords "green growth" and "green development" are two such interchangeable terms that are currently trending in both the developed and developing countries.

The essential element that we ought to recognise with regard to the two terms is that while economic growth, which has been the holy grail of development for many decades for both the developed and developing world, has indeed delivered much in terms of economic development, it has left much to be desired in terms of pollution and environmental degradation as well as equitable distribution of the benefits of economic development.

Thus the notion of green growth is to temper the "economic growth at all costs" paradigm with more environmentally-regulated and equitable constraints imposed by government through public policy (as the free market will not deliver either on its own).

The question facing the world now, including Bangladesh, is to find ways of making this happen in each country taking into account its own unique features and circumstances.

I will discuss some of the ways through which Bangladesh may move forward to achieve green growth.

**Mainstreaming into planning**

Given that Bangladesh relies heavily on five-year plans and other long-term plans—such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda, the upcoming 2041 Perspective Plan currently under preparation, and the Delta Plan 2100—it is imperative for these plans to adopt an explicitly pro-environment, pro-poverty alleviation and equitable growth strategy for future public sector planning and investments. I believe this is indeed taking place to a large extent at a reasonable pace.

**Working with the private sector**

The main engine of economic growth will necessarily be the private sector, rather than the public sector, and there will need to be a two-pronged approach to involve the private sector in delivering green growth. This can be termed as a "carrot and stick" approach.

The carrot part of the equation is to demonstrate and reward private companies that adopt and practice good governance and environmental protection. This can be done by giving annual sustainable development awards to companies from different sectors in order to encourage good practices and demonstrate the "reputation advantage" in doing so.

This is likely to work for some but not all. Not everyone is equally concerned about their reputation. Hence the stick approach has to be used in this case in order to enforce both environmental and labour regulations.

The situation in Bangladesh in general is not so much that we lack good policies and regulations but that we don't enforce the ones we have. This problem boils down to a matter of good versus bad governance where, too often, the offenders are able to avoid penalties by either outright bribery or strong political influence. The decades-long struggle by authorities trying unsuccessfully to shift the highly polluting tannery industries from the Hazaribagh area of Dhaka is an excellent case in point!

There are many other such examples that can be cited. Hence a strong top-down push for better enforcement of existing laws and regulations is by far the need of the hour.

**Creating future "green citizens"**

The final part of the puzzle, especially for the longer term plans, is to cultivate our younger generation into environmentally aware "green citizens" so that the idea of green development and practice comes from our own consciousness and sense of personal responsibility rather than from laws and enforcement by police or other authorities.

A truly civilised country is one in which abiding by laws and good practice is seen as a personal responsibility of each and every citizen rather than for authorities to enforce. It may seem like a far-fetched idea for Bangladesh at this point in time but it is worth retaining that aspiration as part of our long-term plans.

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## A WORD A DAY

**BRUTALISM**

noun

*A style of architecture or art characterised by a deliberate plainness, crudity, or violence of imagery*

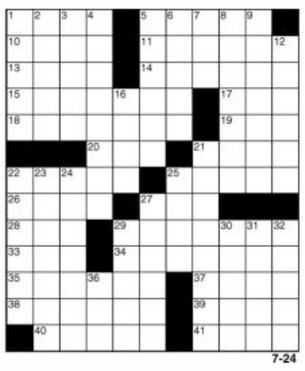
## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

1 Poet Ogden
5 Bitter
10 Choir voice
11 Newtwork need
13 Watch part
14 Highly decorative
15 Misbehaved
17 Luau garland
18 Tutor's units
19 Tavern
20 Ancient
21 Blanchett of "Blue Jasmine"
22 Troop member
25 Printer need
26 Custom
27 Football's Marino
28 Anger
29 Conman's marks
33 Campaign pro
34 Started a pot
35 Make possible
37 "Apollo 13" org.
38 Soon-to-be-grad
39 Like dimes
40 Fashionably dated
41 Punch

**DOWN**

1 Tennis star Rafael
2 Wonderland guest
3 ERA. RBI, etc.
4 Finishes on the green
5 In the area
6 Army group
7 Sprint
8 Rome native
9 Cold War easing
12 Director Rob
16 Pinchead
21 Book fill
22 Shoplifts
23 TV's Quincy, for one
24 Like some rural bridges
25 Diplomacy
27 Moolah
29 Gallantry
30 Boise's state
31 Band output



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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

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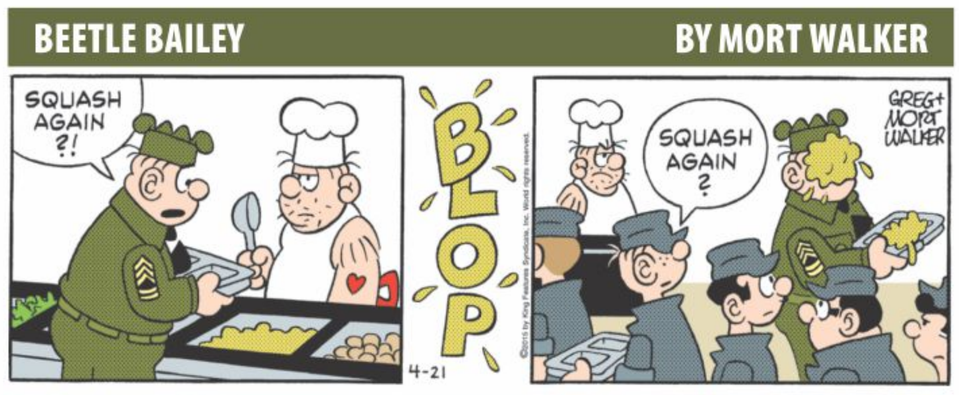
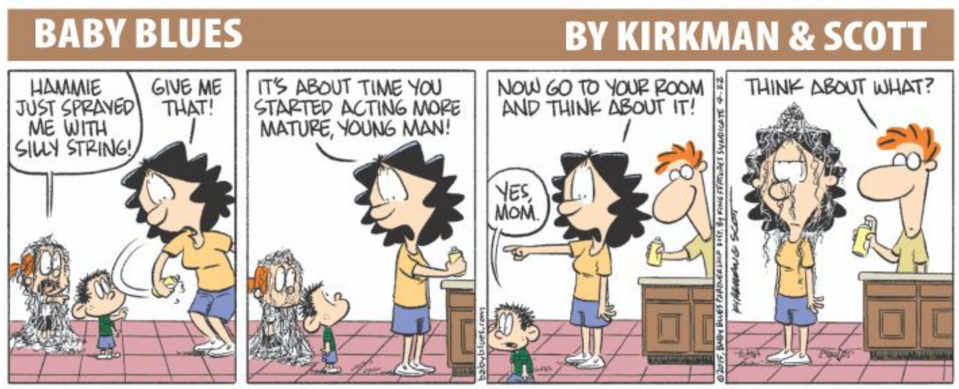
## BEETLE BAILEY — BY MORT WALKER




## BABY BLUES — BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT