

INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

In the morning of June 10 this year, 30-year-old widow Sukhia Robidas was raped in her own home in Sutang Bazar of Habiganj and then chased down and beaten to death with a log by 35-year-old Shailu Mian when she tried to flee. On February 15, 2014, 30-year-old Sabita Chakma was also killed after being raped by four settlers when she went to collect grass for her cattle on the banks of Chengi River, Khagrachari. Cases of such violence against indigenous women like Sukhia of the Robidas community and Sabita of the Chakma tribe are commonplace but hard-pressed to be found in the news and demonstrate the lack of security of indigenous women in their everyday lives.

"In Bangladesh, women are disadvantaged compared to men. Indigenous women are further marginalised than Bengali women, thus making indigenous women the most disadvantaged group in the country," states Rani Yan Yan, queen of the Chakma Circle, at a discussion on indigenous women's rights. Indigenous women are especially prone to discrimination and sexual and gender-based violence on



PHOTO: STAR FILE

NO COUNTRY FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Indigenous women suffer discrimination on multiple fronts—as women and as minorities

MALIHA KHAN

account of their gender, ethnicity, religion and socioeconomic status.

Worldwide, indigenous people account for less than five percent of the world's population, but make up 15 percent of the poorest, according to the UN. This statistic is characteristic of the exclusion indigenous peoples, especially women, face. Though the rights of the indigenous peoples are not one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the rights of indigenous women are upheld through goal five (gender equality)—which calls for the empowerment of all women and girls.

As a UN member state, Bangladesh has committed to the realisation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDGs. The SDGs were launched with the commitment to "leave no one behind", with a key lesson learned from the MDGs being that vulnerable groups such as indigenous women face double discrimination and so, saw the least progress. However, indigenous peoples, particularly women and girls, are still behind in the progress of the SDGs as a result of suffering from disproportionate violence and exclusion at the national level.

Violence against indigenous women and girls

Findings of the Kapaeeng Foundation, an indigenous rights' organisation,

showed that between the years 2013 and 2017 (till June), there have been a total of 364 cases of human rights violations of indigenous women and girls. The most number of cases were of physical assault (106), followed by rape (100) and attempted rape (66). Between January and June of this year alone, 10 indigenous women and girls have been raped, three others were murdered after rape, eight were victims of attempted rape, and six were sexually harassed. These are only the documented cases.

According to the Kapaeeng Foundation's 2016 Human Rights Report on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh, 85 percent of the perpetrators in the 53 documented cases of violence against indigenous women and girls that year were non-indigenous people. The report also noted that two percent of the perpetrators were members of law enforcement agencies.

The findings also showed that the number cases of violence against indigenous women and girls have been falling over the last few years—down from 122 in 2014 to 85 in 2015 and finally to 58 in 2016. However, Barrister Sara Hossain, honorary executive director of BLAST, points out that this may not be a reduction in cases of abuse but rather indicative of underreporting of such cases to the authorities.

Lack of access to medical and legal services in remote areas and language barriers, among other challenges, combine to deter indigenous women and girls from reporting cases of violence against them. "Even among those filed, how many of those cases are going to completion? Are indigenous women and girls receiving adequate treatment, compensation and rehabilitation?" asks Hossain.

Exclusion at the national level

At the national level, there is a need for sex-disaggregated and ethnicity-disaggregated data on sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls, notes Yan Yan. Only then can the disproportionate violence faced by indigenous women and girls be measured and highlighted. There is also no separate allocation for indigenous women in Bangladesh's Gender Budget 2016-2017.

Bangladesh is part of the 2017 Voluntary National Review (VNR) of the UN High Level Political Forum to assess the country's progress in implementing the SDGs. However, indigenous women's groups were not at the table, though wide consultation was called for. "Their issues were not likely to have been brought up," says Yan Yan.

Yan Yan adds that the lives of indigenous women are intricately attached to the environment, which goals 13, 14 and 15 of the SDGs address. "Thus, our involvement in the VNR is essential. So far, indigenous organisations have been involved in SDG implementation discussions, but no indigenous women's groups have been involved yet."

According to Hossain, indigenous women have not only been excluded by the government but also by civil society organisations. "Present laws do not reflect indigenous women's experiences. There are no provisions for them in court—a lack of translators for example. This is also a failing of ours [civil society organisations]."

"Deliberate exclusion of indigenous people, especially women, is increasingly representative of a culture of conformity in Bangladesh today," according to Khushi Kabir, coordinator of Nijera Kori and member of the International Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Commission. Kabir says

that a particular orthodox Islam has taken hold and is marginalising other sects and entire religions.

Across different social and economic indicators, indigenous women are particularly disadvantaged. According to Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, distinguished fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue and convener of the Citizen's Platform on SDGs, "Whether in terms of the poverty line, nutrition levels, or education attained, indigenous women were found to be the furthest behind."

Dr. Bhattacharya attributes this state of indigenous women to three main factors—discrimination against women, communal aggression and national negligence. The last point, for example, was clear in the case of the deaths of 10 children in Tripura Para, Sitakunda last month. Cause of death was found to be measles but what proved equally fatal was that the children were unvaccinated and suffering from malnutrition in an area out of the purview of government healthcare coverage.

Duplicity exists in Bangladesh, asserts Dr. Bhattacharya, where a good face is shown at international platforms but issues such as the inclusion of indigenous peoples in SDG implementation are not addressed domestically. "This cannot continue or the SDGs will not be successful in Bangladesh."

Indigenous women fight for their rights on two levels—as minorities and as women. "We, the indigenous peoples, have been fighting year-round for social change," says Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma, president of the BIPF and chairman of the CHT Regional Council. The fight for the rights of indigenous women needs to be included as a part of the larger battle for women's rights and against gender-based discrimination and violence in Bangladesh. ■

LANGUAGE

Nestled in the foothills of the Meghalaya district, just a short way from the Ranikor river that flows in from India and dries up in Bangladesh, is a place called Burungachhora, that is not on Google Maps.

A stone's throw away from the electric fence that separates the two countries, a two-roomed school made of corrugated tin sheets is doing something that many of its larger counterparts have not managed yet.

The school, which is a part of a country-wide network called Aloghar, is providing education in indigenous language from pre-primary till second grade.

"We are located within walking distance of a Garo community so we have a mix of Garo and Bangla children in this school," says Nandan Chammugong, the head-teacher. He brings out a collection of books with the familiar Latin script spelling out words that the average Bangladeshi will hardly ever read in their life-time. "For our pre-primary children we supplement the reading with nursery rhymes and songs in the local Garo language," he says. They even go the extra mile to preserve the language by using toys like plastic zoo animal figurines as props to teach local names of objects not referenced in everyday-vernacular. The tiny village school which does not even have desks also has a pre-kindergarten class targeting early-childhood education, so that mother-tongue education can start early. This goes on until third-grade when mainstreaming happens. By that time, the children have had five years of mother-tongue education under their belts.

The school is NGO-run—by the well-known Catholic charity, Caritas Bangladesh—and is a far cry from the government primary schools that have only been able to provide mother-tongue education to kindergarteners. The project to introduce text-books in the mother-tongue was undertaken in 2013 in recognition of the rights of minorities—a laudable effort for sure—but it is yet to fully deliver.

It took the government all of four years to simply get the pre-primary books out whereas schools like Chammugong's are already providing them until second-grade even though they only started one year ahead of the department of primary education. This means that the largest chunk of primary schools, 82.9 percent to be exact according to last year's census, are barely kickingstarting education in mother-tongue.

"We are currently developing the books for the first-grade," says Dr Aung Kya Jai, the leader of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board team making the Marma books. Dr Jai's team aims to make a book a year, until third grade, for all primary schools.

"The idea is to ease them into mainstream Bangla education. Pre-primary education will be completely in the mother-tongue. A quarter of the materials will be taught in Bangla in the first grade. In second grade, half of all materials will be taught in Bangla," says Dr Jai. By fifth grade, the student would be fully immersed in Bangla-medium education.

At the moment though, the books given out are only in the languages of Chakma, Marma, Tripura and Garo—four out of numerous spoken by the different ethnic minorities.

"The Santals have not been catered to, as of yet, but the making of the books is in the works," says Dr Jai. According to indigenous education experts, the delay surrounding the Santhali books stems from the age-old conflict of which script should be used for the nation of Santals who span over both India and Bangladesh. According to 'Santhali: A Never-Ending Struggle for Existence'

"We let the communities volunteer to make the books. They documented what they wanted their children to learn and also decided what scripts to use," says Nanuar. The Khasiya textbooks were developed by communities in Sylhet, while Sadri was developed in Dinajpur, he adds.

Perhaps the most important hurdle that the government will be dealing with is re-teaching indigenous teachers their own languages so that they can use the books that are being given out. Years of majoritarian Bangla education and the lack of a body of mainstream indigenous

language. It is precisely because of reasons like these that weekend classes in indigenous languages are propping up over the city. "A lot of the adults never received education in their mother-tongue and wanted to learn it, so we started offering classes," says Mishuk Chakma, the coordinator of one such programme run by a school that calls itself JUVBDA academy. The acronym stands for Jumma Volunteer Blood Donors Association, and as Mishuk Chakma put it, they expanded from being just blood donors to language preservationists because of the immense



PHOTO: JOY CHAKMA

THE GOVERNMENT'S GOT YOUR TONGUE

ZYMA ISLAM

published in the 2016 issue of *South Asian Journal for Multidisciplinary Studies*, Santhali vernacular has been documented in Oriya, Bangla and English. The research says that colonial-age Bible societies and missionaries were the first to develop the Latin-based script that is also used by Tripura, Khashiya, Garo and others. Oriya and Bangla scripts originated from the respective communities of Santals in Odisha and Bengal. In order to decolonise the script, the Ol Chiki script was developed in 1925 by Pandit Raghunath Murmu, adding yet another option to choose from.

On the flipside, the Aloghar Schools provide indigenous education in Kurukh, Sadri, Oraon, Santhali, Mro, Khariya, Munda and Khasia, in addition to Chakma, Marma, Garo, Tripura. "We have 18 Khasiya, 12 Gao and 5 Sadri schools providing indigenous education just in Sylhet," says Pius Nanuar, the person in charge of the schools in the Sylhet division.

literature in many of the languages mean that certain minority communities only actively practice the vernacular.

For example Chammugong did not know how to read and write Garo, and had to relearn it himself before he could take classes. "Fortunately, Garo is written in Latin script and I know English, so the training was not hard," clarifies the head-teacher. Pius Nanuar too, belongs to the Sadri community but only knew the vernacular at first. Sadri too is written in Roman script. The case is different however for Chakma and Marma languages which are written in their own scripts.

"Marma has a script similar to Burmese," describes Dr Jai, "this means that people who can't read or write it have to learn a new alphabet." Marma stemmed from the Arakanese family of languages, which is different from both Chakma and Bangla.

A 2013 research conducted by BRAC University on a small sample size of 30 Chakma-identifying people in Dhaka city found that only 23 percent were fluent in speaking and writing their own

interest from the public. "We do not teach advanced language though, only basic alphabet and vocabulary," says Chakma.

"We are in the process of preparing training manuals for teachers," adds Dr Jai, when asked about the glaring gap of teacher illiteracy in their mother-tongues. It is then up to the government to organise such trainings, he says. How these teachers would be identified and recruited, however, is a question, given that the national census of 2016 conducted by the directorate of primary education failed to survey the ethnic background of teachers. The census contains no information about how many indigenous teachers there are, which communities they are from and where they are located.

This means that the government currently does not have the information to find Lucy Manda, who is a Garo teacher of Mugaipar government primary school. "I can read and write in my language only a little, but am not fluent," says the teacher whose career spans 40 years in that school. Having said that, training may not even be an issue for her, seeing that she claims her school did not even get the pre-primary books despite having Garo students. "We have 29 Garo students up to class five," she adds.

It is commendable that the non-governmental sector is rising up to the challenge of meeting the needs of indigenous children and preserving the languages but when can we expect the same from the state? ■