

Indigenous displacement and our complicity



MYAT MOE KHAING

If you were forced out from your ancestral land today, where would you go? How long could you walk in your torn sandals? Where would you sleep as developers transformed the space shared by your siblings into a luxury suite for travellers willing to spend Tk 18,000 per night? How would you console your hungry children? What do you tell your old mother traumatised from generational conflicts?

The construction of a five star hotel and tourist spot in Bandarban by Sikder group will wipe out six villages of the Mro Indigenous community. The project will acquire about 405 hectares of land, levelling down hills, clearing forests and disrupting natural water sources.

The Mro people have no answer to these questions. Neither do the evictors intend to answer them.

The United Nations defines Indigenous peoples as inheritors and practitioners of unique cultures and ways of relating to people and environment. They have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they live. There are at least 45 different Indigenous groups recognised by the government as ethnic minorities in Bangladesh. The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), an area of approximately 5,089 square miles in south-eastern Bangladesh, is home to 11.

Historically the CHT existed as an independent territory without a formalised political system. In 1860, the British annexed the region as an administrative district of Bengal. The colonisers had to decide whether they wanted to control the region by placing British administrators, or do it indirectly through local representatives. The latter was the cheaper option. The British chose three chiefs who sat on the major

rivers—the Maung Raja in the north-west, Chakma Raja in the central and northern Hill Tracts, and Bohmong Raja in the south.

When plain land traders were increasingly moving to the hills, the colonisers predicted the locals would fall into debt, consequently harming colonial taxation prospects. Hence, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation, 1900 was devised to separate the hills from the plains and prevent its transition to a market economy. This move meant the complex land laws, tax systems and court procedures were not applicable in this region. For example, the Income Tax Act of 1922 applied to all persons in the Chittagong Hill Tracts except the Indigenous population. Recognising their special ethnic status, the principal legal instrument referred to “indigenous hillman” and “indigenous tribesman” interchangeably.

The idea underlying hill agriculture entails rights in land, but not the kind in a western system or the Mughal rule. When Indigenous Peoples wanted to cultivate a land, they informed the village *Karbari*. After accumulation of information, they approached the *Mauza* headmen who assigned the land. They owned their lands orally, which was socially accredited, and transferred to them by verbal commitment, informing the Raja and paying annual tax. This implied title documents weren’t a thing.

Indigenous comes from the Latin word *indigena*, which means “sprung from the land”. The term reinforces land acknowledgements of Indigenous peoples. Their collective rights to territories and resources are embedded in the International Labour Organization’s Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No 169 and 107. Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is a specific right recognised in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) that allows Indigenous peoples to give or withhold consent to a project that may affect them or territories.

Yet the very lack of documentation and a national legal framework

recognising their Indigenous status is misused to evict Indigenous people from their lands worldwide. The construction of Kaptai dam, the only hydropower source of present day Bangladesh, in 1960 by the government of East Pakistan submerged 54,000 acres of arable land. The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs reports 100,000 people lost their principal economic base. Only 20,000 acres of inferior

grew from 11.6 percent of the regional population in 1974 to 48.5 percent in 1991.

Settlers have been grabbing Indigenous land, cutting the communities off from resources vital to survival and pushing them towards violence and extinction as people. When the affected try to assert their rights, they suffer abuse owing to political and economic marginalisation.



The Mro community held protests against the proposed hotel construction at the Kapru Bazar area in Bandarban on November 8, 2020. PHOTO: COLLECTED

quality land was allocated under the re-settlement scheme. The government didn’t allocate land to 8,000 swidden cultivators/jumma families as their customary rights to their jum lands were not recognised.

The government of Pakistan amended the Regulation several times against the will of the locals to facilitate transmigration of non-Indigenous people from the plains into the CHT. It further abrogated the “Excluded Area Status” of the CHT in 1963. Section 51 of the said Regulation, which put a restriction on the outsider Bengali Muslim migration, was repealed in 1965. Between 1980 and 1985, another transmigration programme in the CHT was facilitated. The settlers were mostly landless families from the plain districts, some of whom were homeless due to river erosion. The Bengali population

Tourist development has forced communities to leave their traditional lands. Today, Mro people fear the hotel construction will damage sacred sites, forests, water resources and biodiversity in the area. Tourists, on the other hand, are devoid of this reality. They crave the sound of waterfalls, to explore caves and ride the *Chander Gari*—components that make up today’s quintessential Bangladeshi “adventure”. Green hills under a clear blue sky remain the epitome of wanderlust for female travellers recently overcoming the shackles of patriarchy.

Surprisingly, these experiences don’t seem to awaken any curiosity on how the communities have lived with nature across generations. Rarely does anyone notice Indigenous peoples’ attitudes towards outsiders in their evicted lands, the poverty sharply contrasting the

concrete resorts offering tourists an escape from their busy city lives.

To many outsiders, such invasions make sense because the CHT is being “developed”, the “backdated” *paharis* are finally coming in touch with “civilisation”. The very categorisation justifies intervention through development policies. Is it really development if you are constructing an amusement park?

The UN defines Indigenous development as the growth of an Indigenous community in their originality. The groups hold their own diverse perspectives of development based on traditional values. When we address poverty, it is to be done in a holistic manner, one that goes beyond income. Many development interventions regard poverty as an economic issue, but for Indigenous communities, poverty is about their land, spirituality, and dignity. When these are affected, they regard themselves poor.

Development modules see them as subjects, without any role in decision making and monitoring of development programmes. Why are Indigenous communities recognised as a vulnerable group, not a distinct group? Are they really vulnerable or is it the exclusionary agenda making them vulnerable?

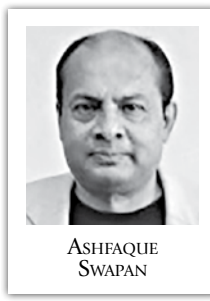
Practices such as hunting, fishing and farming, are inseparable from their food security. Denial of traditional practices is leading to a crisis of identity. It’s like taking away their soul. The land is the source of their spirituality and belief systems. The Mro people revere the forest. Losing their land means a loss of identity.

At the core, Indigenous People’s struggles is that of land rights. Without rights over the territories, Indigenous People’s distinct cultures and the determination of their own development are being eroded. From being the earliest inhabitants to being displaced from their own lands, their story remains ignored. Are we ready to acknowledge it?

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A traveler’s adventures in Covid testing

Atlanta and Dhaka present contrasts, and a surprise



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

During a recent round-trip from Atlanta, US to Dhaka, Bangladesh, I had wildly contrasting experiences in the two cities as I tried to get

clouding the horizon everywhere remind me of a scene out of *The Blade Runner*, a dystopian futuristic sci-fi movie set in a massive, decaying megalopolis where high-tech glitz and public squalor live cheek-by-jowl in a city that’s falling apart.

Given how different the two cities are, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that the Covid-19 testing experience was also quite different. In one city I experienced a publicly-run, reasonably priced, hi-tech operation where the

seamless Covid-19 testing experience was in Dhaka, and the nightmarish experience was in Atlanta.

A few days before leaving Atlanta for Dhaka in early January, my airline notified me that Bangladesh and Turkey required a negative Covid-19 PCR test result prior to boarding the flight.

The tough part was that I could not test earlier than 72 hours prior to my departure. I called around and searched

result. I was a nervous wreck. I managed to board my flight just in time, but saw the airline refuse to allow two passengers to board because they could not present a test result.

My experience in Dhaka was quite different. I learned that there were several reputable establishments offering reliable, timely results. What surprised me was that one of the best was the one run by the government health ministry in association with Bangladesh Army.

I discovered a well-organised, tech-savvy streamlined system at the huge facility in Mohakhali. Competent employees screened attendees swiftly and expertly. My cell number was used as a reference. My application information was carefully double-checked with my passport. Lines were long, but moved at a steady pace. Finally, a health worker, fully protected, took my nasal swab. I got a receipt, and was told I would get a report in 48 hours.

After that, all I had to do was to check the website. In order to protect my privacy, I had to get a one-time password on my cell phone every time I accessed the website. In due time, I had access to a downloadable, official negative Covid-19 PCR test report. My report was cross-checked at a separate airport health kiosk to verify its authenticity.

What I liked most about the Covid-19 testing in Bangladesh is that it is public service at its best—you didn’t have to be a big shot or have connections to access this. This is a critical service open to any member of the general public who was

traveling abroad.

The broad lessons are clear. The obsessive celebration of markets by free-market ayatollahs obscures the fact that some critical tasks may be best performed in the public domain. And yes, I do think Atlanta can learn a lesson or two from Dhaka here. Bangladesh was wracked by scandals over fake Covid testing. It’s come a long way since then, and full credit to the government for addressing and resolving the issue (although things seem to have improved somewhat in Atlanta after my return—Covid-19 PCR tests with guaranteed results are offered for USD 140 at some places now).

In fact, the whole coronavirus pandemic is an abject lesson on how vital public health services—and public trust in them—are. The US is second to none in scientific talent or wealth, yet the horrendous, continuous toll taken by Covid-19 breaks my heart. The new federal administration, thank goodness, realises the vital importance of public policy and initiative.

In Bangladesh, while I cheer the smart government initiative for Covid-19 testing, I am aware that this is far more an exception than the rule. Still, it’s a positive, heartening development, and it is my hope that the enormous public goodwill generated by a well-run government programme will be an impetus to replicate such excellence in other spheres of government.

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PHOTO: FILE/AMRAN HOSSAIN

testing and reporting were seamless, while in the other city it was a nightmare. Clinics could not guarantee results in time, leaving travellers to sweat it out in suspense as they waited at the departure lounge, desperately hoping they would get a negative test result notification by email in time.

the Internet in vain. No clinic could guarantee a test result within 72 hours. One clinic suggested I come in early in the morning and leave a sample and hope for the best!

I had no choice. I went ahead and did just that. Sure enough, I ended up at the airport departure lounge without a test

QUOTABLE Quote

ADLAI STEVENSON II
(February 5, 1900 – July 14, 1965)
American lawyer, politician, and diplomat

Patriotism is not a short and frenzied outburst of emotion but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Ten-armed swimmer
- 6 Comb parts
- 11 Pound part
- 12 Dome-shaped home
- 13 Tiramisu ingredients
- 15 Mine yield
- 16 Bank acct. addition
- 17 Fitting
- 18 Orchestra section
- 20 Maiden name label
- 21 Honey maker
- 22 Seed holders
- 23 Really stoked
- 26 Long sandwiches
- 27 Blowgun ammo
- 28 Grass coating
- 29 Singer Yoko
- 30 Zeppelin
- 34 PBS documentary series
- 35 Arrest
- 36 Count start
- 37 Nimble dancer
- 40 Canvas holder
- 41 Fashionably dated
- 42 Eat away
- 43 Exams

DOWN

- 1 Recital highlights
- 2 Milk buy
- 3 Beneath
- 4 Quite cold
- 5 Clearly set out
- 6 Colors
- 7 Mayo ingredient
- 8 Mrs. Roosevelt
- 9 Sub weapon
- 10 Party thrower
- 14 “Picnic” playwright
- 19 “Yeah sure!”
- 22 Chapel seating
- 23 Birth parent seeker
- 24 Famed rechorse
- 25 Condition
- 26 President Hoover
- 28 Watch part
- 30 Low joint
- 31 Owl cries
- 32 Like argon
- 33 Mexican money
- 38 Homer’s neighbor
- 39 Golf bag item

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

S	T	A	G	S	S	L	U	R	
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT