INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Indigenous women know how to nurture nature

Are we ready to listen to them?

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RANI YAN YAN

"IF you enrage nature, it will repay you with sufferings and hardships," said one elderly Mro woman. Other elders nodded quietly, but their non-verbal affirmation spoke a thousand words.

SungAw, a word in Mro language, defines both nature and environment, as Mro people do not distinguish between the two. In their own way, Mro women explained that all natural elements are intrinsically and harmoniously linked to each other, and harming one element will eventually have an impact on other elements, initiating a string of causal effects that are deemed to create an imbalance in the natural world. Humans, like any other living beings, cannot escape the consequences. Driven by such experiential knowledge passed down from generation to generation, these communities have been religiously practising sustainable natural resource management, long before the scientific community came up with the term. It is now widely acknowledged around the world that Indigenous traditional knowledge is contemporary and dynamic, and is of equal value to any other form of knowledge. However, in Bangladesh, the depth of Indigenous women's understanding of the natural world and the inherent value of traditional knowledge and traditional practices are yet to be fully learnt, understood and duly recognised by the scientific community, development practitioners and policymakers alike. "Surviving with nature," – as opposed to surviving by "fighting against nature" – essentially defines this community's way of life. But the question now is, for how long?

Through a series of intergenerational dialogues between women and men at three villages of Mro communities, the richness of Indigenous traditional knowledge and the indispensable role that Indigenous women play in the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge came to light. So did the tough challenges that women in these communities are facing while carrying out this role in a socioeconomic and political landscape that has changed drastically over the past two decades. The latter needs more attention, as the environmental violence that these communities have long been enduring exacerbates disproportionately the hardships and sufferings of Indigenous women.

Mother, soil and compassion. VISUAL: JOYDEB ROAZA

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Environmental violence is perpetrated by politically influential non-resident entities and goons through the over-exploitation of forest produces and illegal extraction of stones from stream basins in the adjacent forests, causing severe environmental degradation in their localities.

"They have chopped off all the large trees in the forests. The streams have dried up. Let alone getting fish and crabs from those streams, we cannot even get sufficient drinking water... We have to walk half a day worth of distance just to get water during the dry season."

While both women and men are custodians of traditional knowledge, Indigenous men and women bear specific knowledge on the different aspects of daily activities and various communal affairs due to the gendered dimension of roles and responsibilities within these communities. Indigenous women, being the primary responsibility bearers in ensuring food and nutrition for their families, are the repository of knowledge on native flora and fauna, including crops, seeds and medicinal plants, seasons, weather and sustainable agricultural and foraging methods. Their knowledge is nature-based, and their practice is intrinsically linked to land, forest and every other natural element of their surroundings. Hence, when these communities experienced dispossession of land, be that of ancestral land through forceful eviction to make way for a firing range, or of *Jhum* land to build a popular tourist resort, or of community forest land by a non-local land-grabber, Mro women considered it as "the beginning of the end" of their survival with nature and of preserving traditional knowledge.

Constrained with limited access to land, these communities had little to no choice but to adopt non-traditional methods of agriculture, such as intense or repeated farming and cash crop cultivation, which resulted in the decline of soil fertility and yield of produce. And like a domino effect, overdependence on chemical fertilisers, replacement of native crops with hybrid varieties, increasing use of chemical pesticides to protect those novel varieties of crops followed suite. Indigenous women's knowledge on scores of native crop varieties and pest repellent plants is steadily becoming obsolete in the face of this new development.

"We used to seek forgiveness from nature if a drop of pesticide fell on our Jhum *soil... We were told that without using pesticides and fertilisers, we wouldn't get a good yield of these crops. After a few years of applying those chemicals, our soil fertility and productivity have declined even more. Now fertilisers, pesticide, whatever we use, nothing works."*

With the increase in using chemical pesticides and fertilisers came newer forms of health issues, including reproductive health-related complications predominantly affecting younger Indigenous women – complications that traditional medicines cannot cure. Besides, plants with medicinal properties to treat even common illnesses are becoming rare in the adjacent depleted forests. Subsequently, communities are increasingly relying on modern medicines and treatments, draining their already strained finances.

"We are falling sick more frequently. In the past, we did not need to seek medical treatment from doctors. We used to prepare our own medicine from plants that grow in the forests, and it used to cure our illnesses. Forests are gone, so are the [medicinal] plants."

There are certain foraging methods of edible and medicinal plants and wild animals from forests and waterbodies that allow natural regeneration to ensure that the stock of natural resources do not deplete, an ancient traditional practice that much of the younger generation of women has now abandoned in these villages. This course of deviation from traditional practice can be directly attributed to the fact that women, especially young women, are concerned about their safety at the hands of outsiders. The increasing presence of non-Indigenous persons/outsiders in the forests, mostly labourers and businessmen of illegal logging and stone-extracting activities, have resulted in women self-restricting their movement within a certain perimeter of the forests.

"There have been a few incidents where Bangalees chased our women with bad intentions. On each occasion, they fled leaving behind their baskets, machetes, etc... Our women gather enough courage to go to the streams and forests that are a bit far from our village."

In the past, it was strictly prohibited by custom to cultivate on the edges of streams to prevent depletion of water level, a custom that only elderly women can now recall. When cultivable land is made scarce, the yield of crops is in rapid decline and sustenance by sustainable foraging of natural resources is no longer an option, the viability of Indigenous traditional practices that are acclaimed for the conservation of environment and biodiversity for the survival of these communities is put to question by the very knowledge-holders.

What has been shared above is a glimpse of a fraction of what Indigenous traditional knowledge entails. The theme to commemorate this year's International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples allows us to recognise and celebrate Indigenous women's rich knowledge and indispensable role in preserving and transmitting traditional knowledge. While there have been multiple calls for documentation of Indigenous traditional knowledge, which by all means is equally important, it should not be forgotten that knowledge is best preserved by practice. "What is the use of this knowledge if we are not allowed to practise?" This rhetorical question posed by a Mro woman is sufficient to provoke our thoughts on this matter. A conducive environment is needed where Indigenous women can continue practising, preserving and transmitting traditional knowledge, a precious inheritance of utmost significance in preserving the world's cultural diversities as well as in conserving biodiversity and environment. However, without protecting and ensuring the rights of Indigenous peoples to land, territory and natural resources, the inherent and ongoing challenges will continue to linger.

Based on the narratives of Mro Indigenous women documented during an intercultural research on indigenous women, traditional knowledge and environmental violence.

Navigating a world without Indigenous representation

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MYAT MOE KHAING

IN Class 6, my class read about my community in a social science book. It was just an introduction of our food habits and where we lived. There was no mention of our distinct social, economic or political systems unique to Indigenous identity. Truth was, I could see the non-Indigenous world only, but not myself.

Once a co-worker told me I belonged to the common area of all overlapping circles that represented minorities based on gender, religion and race. He didn't hint at my high vulnerability level, rather envied that I enjoyed all the "minority privileges" that would help my application get accepted to foreign programmes. He made me feel guilty.

Like me, many Indigenous people see themselves only through others' eyes.

Article 9 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that Indigenous people have the right to belong to an Indigenous community in accordance with the concerned traditions and customs. No discrimination of any kind may arise from the exercise of such a right. Yet, a lack of representation is intertwined with ignorance towards Indigenous history and identity. We are called immigrants whereas we are the first inhabitants to our region. We are debated by groups, telling us who we really are and how our food habits should change. It's humiliating!

When a child is disrespected for who she is, she will reject her home and culture. It's easier to believe what she is shown than dig into her unpreserved ethnic history. Confidence is not the obvious outcome, rather the exception. Beauty images are served that look nothing like us. We grow up being called *chinku*, ridiculed for our *bocha naak*. Our food habits are labelled unhygienic. Where is the culture survival guide for Indigenous children?

A lack of representation in leadership makes the positions appear out of reach for them. Imagine yourself in their place. With no precedents set, you don't know what's right. The formula for a reality like yours has not been cracked yet. Securing a spot requires additional creativity and courage. Creativity, because you are not served images of people like you, so you have to create them in your head. "How do I pass the entrance exam when I am not well-versed in Bangla or English?" Courage, because you don't even know if you are actually welcome.

The isolating feeling persists in a lifelong cycle. People around us are amazed by Kaptai Lake's beauty, turning a blind eye to the displacement of thousands in 1960. Our friends plan trips to Sajek and we cannot help but tear up because of the food crisis in the region. When we are frustrated, we are called antagonists. It's as if only we get to see that the hills are bloody, and it is lonely because no one else does.

One might reach a conclusion that Indigenous peoples are good at sports. For example, it is an exciting time when Bangladesh is facing India in the SAFF U-20 final where Indigenous players like Sojol Tripura are representing the country. Last year, Bangladesh's U-19 women's team clinched the SAFF U-19 Women's Championship after defeating India 1-0. In the 80th minute, right-back Indigenous player Anai Mogini's long range cross outside the D-Box led to Bangladesh scoring the winning goal. This is when it is important to reflect: Do we have Indigenous representation in decision-making for the career of these Indigenous players? How can we make sports more accessible for Indigenous aspirants from the remotest corners?

Other professions commonly associated with Indigenous communities are tied with access and perceptions. At beauty salons, I admire the sense of sisterhood among Garo salon workers chatting in their mother tongue when attending to customers. Indigenous waitresses or store staff, coming to the cities to earn a livelihood, are exemplary for the sheer determination to adapt to a completely different cultural setting. As much as these professions have given them financial freedom, it can become dangerous if their possibilities are limited to these. Employers may deem ethnic candidates only fit for blue-collar positions, creating a glass ceiling.

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Even when you make it, you don't feel you belong. You tell yourself, "I have to be grateful for a seat at the table." You have to work extra hard to prove you are worthy. Much of this conditioning can lead one to mainstream themselves for acceptance. When culinary expert Arpon Changma established CHT Express that specialises in Chakma food items, people came to his restaurant and, upon seeing ethnic faces, left. Yet, today, the chef of BBQ Express is pushing the culinary envelope unifying different cultures: the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Texas and Dhaka.

Representing culture through work has been long done by artist Kanak Chanpa Chakma. Her subject of women represents the point at which Chanpa's artistry converges with her activism. In her art, chores like carrying water and cultivating are testament to the extraordinary everyday strength of the Indigenous women she depicts. Her paintings are often accompanied by a mix of red, yellow and blue. While the colours depict hope and cultural heritage, Kanak doesn't shy away from using red to depict the pain and violence that has been inflicted upon Indigenous communities.

Kanak recognises the immense work it takes for an Indigenous artist to gain a foothold in the country's art scene. In an effort to create a ripple effect, she founded Ethnic Artists' Forum, mentoring a young group of Indigenous artists. I visited "The colours of youth," which was the first ever art exhibition by Indigenous artists for me. It was the first time I saw my community's reflection in art: Indigenous motherhood, the intertwining existence of nature and ethnic communities. Do you remember the first time you felt seen?

Representation aids in the creation and validation of the identity of the represented. It is the seemingly unimportant moments where people see someone who looks like them in the media or workplace, and are subconsciously influenced by this experience. Indigenous content creators like Sukanan Chakma and Payel Tripura are claiming their place in fashion and entertainment in the digital world. Their presence in trendy TikTok videos allows me to see our Indigenous culture as a part of the evolving digital landscape, too.

Such content fights misrepresentation. Storylines with a Bangalee girl playing the role of an Indigenous young woman falling in love with the settlers reinforce the Bangalee fantasy towards Indigenous women. Authentic Indigenous representation in media is an antithesis to Nuhash Humayun's advert for Tecno, where an Indigenous boy is given a Bangalee name, portrayed to offer namaz, and where Bangalee settlers live in bamboo-framed homes of the ethnic communities.

Navigating the world as an Indigenous person is like walking between two different worlds. You belong to neither. You are too foreign for the outside world, yet you are stripped off your identity when you want to make your place. Seeking representation is asking for fairness, to extend beyond a fantastical realm. How else do we promulgate the truth of our Indigeneity?