

# Who is ‘Indigenous?’



Wasfia Nazreen  
is a mountaineer, activist, environmentalist,  
social worker and writer.

WASFIA NAZREEN

The recent debate on “Indigenoussness” in the context of Bangladesh has thrown up many questions on the appropriateness of the “Indigenous” identity of the peoples of Bangladesh, particularly the *Pahari* (hill) peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The government line is that the Paharis are not indigenous to Bangladesh, while Bangalees are. On the other hand, the Jumma peoples and the Plains Adibashis insist that they are indigenous peoples.

Who is right? Who are the Indigenous—the Adibashis or the Bangalees? Or are they both indigenous?

An informed discussion on the subject will not be possible unless we clarify the context. The relevant context here is human rights and the framework necessarily has to be the one ascribed by that premier club of the world’s sovereign states: the United Nations. Although our former foreign minister is known to have cited dictionary meaning(s) of the term, “Indigenous,” quoting them to be those who “belong to a particular place rather than coming to it from somewhere else,” the debate cannot be settled by referring to dictionaries, but by looking at the term’s meaning as understood in the relevant UN instruments, processes, and other international human-rights mechanisms, while paying appropriate attention to the political and legal contexts of Bangladesh.

And, of course, we must not ignore history. Let us therefore explore the history of settlements in Bangladesh, and the implications of the recent amendments of the constitution.

## Ancestral backgrounds of the Adibashis

The most pertinent question in this respect is, were there peoples living in different parts of Bangladesh—and not necessarily spread over all parts of Bangladesh—before the arrival of the currently dominant groups (the Bangalees) in those parts of the country?

Citing the government of Bangladesh’s communication to him, the UN Special Rapporteur Martinez Cobo wrote that the government regarded members of tribal and semi-tribal populations as Indigenous on account of their descent from populations which are settled in specified geographical areas of the country.

Thus, the question is, were the different Adibashi peoples settled in the different parts of the country such as the CHT (e.g., Chakma, Marma, Tripura), the Barind tract (e.g., Santal, Munda, Oroan), the Madhupur tract (Garó, Hajong) and so forth, before the Bangalees settled there?

## Indigenoussness of the CHT Adibashis (Jummas)

Historical records of the Portuguese, Mughals, and British, and oral and written accounts

of the Jummas themselves clearly attest to the fact that all the 11 Jumma peoples were in existence in the CHT-Chittagong-Feni-Noakhali-Comilla region, not just in the hills but also in the plainlands, prior to conquest (in 1666, by the Mughals of a part of Chittagong, Feni-Noakhali, Comilla, etc., but excluding the present-day CHT).

Suniti Bhushan Qanungo writes: “In prehistoric times Chittagong was inhabited successively by the Austro-Asiatic and the Mongoloid groups of peoples.” He adds, “The Mughal conquest of Chittagong drove the Arakanese beyond the hill ranges, and vacated places were occupied by new settlers from

Arakan Hill Tracts, or the State of Tripura”.

In contrast, Bangalees were the last to settle in the CHT.

Most importantly, the CHT was not part of Bengal until after British advent. Eminent historians and sociologists therefore have noted, “In 1860, the British occupied the hills to the east of Chittagong and annexed them to their colonial empire. For the first time in their history, the Chittagong hills were administered from Bengal. Before that time, political power in the hills had been dispersed among many chiefs.”

## Indigenoussness of the Plains Adibashis

As in the case of the CHT, in the plains region as well, there is no record of Adibashis having displaced Bangalees and settled in their present locations. The Santal and Oraon made the Barind tract inhabitable and converted harsh terrain into paddy lands. Similar settlements were made by Rakhaing (Patuakhali-Barguna), Garo and Khasi (Mymensingh-Sylhet), but not by conquering and displacing Bangalees.

As in the case of the CHT, the plains Adibashis were also present in Bangladesh from before there were written histories,

of Bengal included several of the peoples who are claiming indigenous identity.

But the crucial point here is that by having assimilated into the dominant groups and adopting the dominant identity (regardless of the religious and nationalist aspects of that identity) Bangalees can no longer claim the Indigenous mantle as it is understood in the human rights context. The Indigenous concept only makes sense when the peoples are “non-dominant” in statecraft and otherwise.

Contrary to the popular belief portrayed in the media, having an “Indigenous” status does not give anyone privileges of any sort over and above that of other citizens. Essentially, it means the recognition of their full participatory rights as citizens, keeping in mind the exclusion and discrimination historically meted out to them in the process of state formation, nation building and development, which Bangalees have enjoyed from the formation of the state. It also means the creation of an enabling environment, in which they may preserve their distinctive cultural identities, which are threatened on account of their marginal situations from the beginning of state formation.



A programme held at the Central Shaheed Minar premises in Dhaka on occasion of the International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples on August 9, 2017.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

within or outside the district. The Mughal government encouraged the colonisation in northwestern Chittagong, which had been depopulated during the Arakanese regime. The new colonisers, mostly the inhabitants of Noakhali-Tripura-Comilla region were the latest settlers in the district.”

Portuguese accounts refer to “Chacomas,” separately from Bengal, Arakan and Tripura in the mid-16th century. Migration of Jummas to and from present-day Bangladesh, the Indian states of Tripura and Mizoram, and Myanmar happened for centuries. It was not a one-off event. Thus, it is understandable why the CHT Regulation of 1900 defined an Indigenous person of the CHT as “Chakma, [Marma] or a member of any Hill tribe indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Lushai Hills,

imperial conquests, and colonisation.

Even today, despite the de-recognition, and subsequent non-recognition by the state, it is the traditional institutions that these peoples turn to for resolving their internal disputes and for carrying out other cultural activities (Manjhi: Santall, Nokma: Garo, Myntri: Khasi). They do not turn to the mainstream state-centric institutions, unlike the Bangalee peoples.

## Indigenoussness of Bangalees

Of course, Bangalees have also lived in different parts of the plains and delta areas for centuries. However, they have not ventured into the hill and forest areas until relatively recently. Going back to the earliest history of Bengal, prior to the arrival of the Indo-European and Dravidian-speaking peoples, the inhabitants

## Indigenoussness in UN instruments and practices

According to the UN, the most fruitful approach is to identify, rather than formally define indigenous peoples and hence there is no set definition of indigenous peoples in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, international laws do not define minorities either. The “working definition” of Indigenous peoples by José R Martinez Cobo has attained the status of a near-formal definition in the context of UN and international human rights jurisprudence. Cobo writes, “Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from

other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system.”

First and foremost, we should be examining the concept in relation to the ILO Convention on Indigenous & Tribal Populations (Convention No. 107) of 1957, which Bangladesh ratified in June, 1972, under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, about six months before the Constitution of Bangladesh was adopted.

As a collective entity, Bangalees live less in conformity with the “social, economic and cultural institutions” of the time of their pre-colonisation or pre-conquest period ancestors, and more in conformity with “the institutions of the nation to which they belong”, and hence they cannot be regarded as indigenous within the meaning of Convention 107.

In contrast, hill communities of the CHT, and Adibashi groups of the plains, “irrespective of their legal status” are quite the opposite. Traditional institutions in the CHT are formally recognised by law, and while those in the plains are not—still conform to their ancestral institutions’ traditions, norms, and mores.

In the case of “economic institutions”, Bangalees clearly do not retain very many practices of the pre-colonial or pre-conquest period, unlike Pahari groups, for example: collective forest management, subsistence-oriented jhum or “shifting” cultivation, etc.

It is clear from the wording of ILO Convention No. 107 that “indigenous” and “tribal” population groups are both referred to as “tribal or semi-tribal” populations. Therefore, Indigenous populations are those among the tribal and semi-tribal population groups who “[are descended] from the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation and which, irrespective of their legal status, live more in conformity with the social, economic and cultural institutions of that time than with the institutions of the nation to which they belong.”

The concept of tribal and semi-tribal population groups has been related in this convention with “social and economic conditions [that] are at a less advanced [read disadvantaged] stage than the stage reached by the other sections of the national community,” and a “status [that] is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations.”

The concept of indigenous peoples is meaningless in the case of Bangalees from a human rights perspective because Bangalees are at the helm of state power, while the Adibashis were, and still are, substantively, the “excluded” citizens, marginalised and disadvantaged.

**This article was originally published on Forum, a monthly publication of The Daily Star, on September 5, 2011.**

**The full version of the article can be found on our website.**

# Writing in the time of autocracy



Dr Md Mahmudul Hasan  
is a professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia. He can be reached at mmhasan@iiuim.edu.my.

MD MAHMUDUL HASAN

For a long time, I remained largely detached from the events in Bangladesh as I was focused on my academic pursuits. I didn’t worry much about the political fallout at the local and national level or what was happening in the streets or in the corridors of power. I was mainly a man of the classroom and maintained an apolitical stance in my academic work. I wrote and published works related to my research interests. I thought then—as I do now—that by producing academic work, I would hopefully make lasting contributions to my field of knowledge which would benefit generations of learners.

At one point, I received casual and seemingly innocuous comments from some of my friends and acquaintances. Referring to the situations in Bangladesh, they expressed doubts about the efficacy of producing scholarly work that does not give meaning, or is not sensitive, to *la condition humaine*. What they said amounts to this: long-term academic work may have its own value, but how can an academic remain indifferent to the pain of tens of millions of their compatriots under a brutal regime? Or, how could we not raise concerns when massive corruption plagued all state machineries? Or, how long could we remain silent when our country was being plundered and large sums of our money siphoned

off to foreign shores by an autocratic government and its cronies?

For a while, I quietened such whisperings of conscience and continued focusing on my armchair intellectual work which was largely disconnected from the immediate here and now. But my subconscious mind continued speaking to me and sending me messages.

As I visited Bangladesh or spoke with the people of the country and its diasporas, it was obvious that something went terribly wrong in our motherland. People were in constant fear. Anyone could be apprehended by the security forces or forcefully disappeared from their homes or from the streets—during the day or in the middle of the night. Anyone could be fired from their job, their businesses could be ransacked, or their properties could be grabbed. Or, anyone could be harassed or beaten to death in the streets. One simple statement was enough for the security forces or for the ruling party ruffians to justify all such cases of human rights violations: the victim belonged to one of the opposition parties to whom the Hasina-led regime directed its ferocious fury and repressive measures.

We have some numbers or have heard stories about people who were killed or subjected to enforced disappearances during Hasina’s autocracy, which lasted for fifteen and a half years. Thanks to the

media, we were also fed with some information about the victims of the weaponisation of the law on Hasina’s watch.

But it is difficult to put a number on those innumerable Bangladeshis who lived in fear or had a peripatetic life inside and outside the country, as they went into hiding to escape police arrest or torture by the thugs of the ruling party. It is hard to record how many expatriate Bangladeshis didn’t visit their beloved birthplace, as they feared persecution. Their crime might have been some of their social media posts which could be interpreted as criticisms of the government. Many other expatriate Bangladeshis didn’t visit their country simply because of a sense of insecurity that would grip them inside the country once they left the airport.

All these kept disquieting me. Then the “What can I do?” question was also insurmountable. It somewhat paralysed me and made me feel helpless. It was a real let-down.

I found an answer in the end. Yes, I could write to protest against the evils of autocracy. However, it was going to be a challenging task for two main reasons. First, it would take away much of my research time. But I was confident that I would be able to address this through better time management.

The second issue was unpredictable, more serious and beyond my control—writing against the autocratic government would compromise my security. How would I avoid the wrath of a regime that was fundamentally unjust and used enforced disappearances as a tactic to silence dissent?

The government subjected the writer and artist Mushtaq Ahmed (1967–2021) to nine-month long slow

death in police custody. By this, the regime wanted to send a forewarning message to all other writers who might have contemplated exposing its human rights violations and financial corruptions.

Many capable intellectuals and opinion leaders heeded the message and remained silent. They prioritised their own safety and comfort over the independence of their mind and their sense of responsibility to the nation. Some of them continued writing but never touched on the wrongdoings of the government. They explored the aesthetics of flora and fauna or the serenity of lakes, and similar bland subjects. Others provided epistemic cover-ups to Hasina’s autocracy by

seeking to establish moral equivalence between the then and previous governments. The enthusiasts among them eulogised the regime for its mega development projects without touching on their high pricing and massive corruption through which people in the government pocketed money with both hands.

The toadies and lickspittles among the intellectual elites went further; they started to panegyrisé the government hoping for positions, perks or privileges. They helped embolden the regime and allowed it to continue repressing the people of Bangladesh. About such a greedy educated gentry lacking strength of character, poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–

1938) said, “This hungry man bartered away his soul for a piece of bread and caused us great grief thereby.”

I couldn’t bring myself to follow the example of such well-positioned intellectuals devoid of moral convictions.

Long story short, I got over material and psychological obstacles and began writing for Bangladeshi English dailies. By doing so, I was heeding the call of conscience. The alternative was not to write about the regime’s corruptions and injustices on the people. Had I made that choice, the pangs of conscience would have outweighed the temptation to inhabit a comfort zone which is free from the pitfalls of the world that often beset the best among us.



**Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh**  
**Ministry of Education**  
**Secondary and Higher Education Division**  
**International Mother Language Institute (IMLI)**  
**1/Ka, Segunbagicha, Dhaka-1000**  
**[www.imli.gov.bd](http://www.imli.gov.bd)**



**Memo No. 37.26.0000.116.99.003.24-572**

**Date: 22 September 2024**

**Application/proposal for International Mother Language Award 2025**  
**Time Extension Notice**

**The International Mother Language Institute (IMLI) has issued a circular for International Mother Language Award 2025 (Memo No. 37.26.0000.114.23.001-498; Date: 16/07/2024) fixing the deadline for sending application/proposal on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2024. Due to unavoidable circumstances the due date has been extended up to 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2024.**



**(Md. Azharul Amin)**  
**Chair**  
**International Mother Language Medal Selection Committee**  
**&**  
**Director (joint secretary), Routine Charge**  
**International Mother Language Institute (IMLI)**  
**Tel: +88 02 8391346**  
**E-mail: [imli.moebd@gmail.com](mailto:imli.moebd@gmail.com)**

**GD- 501**