



During the July movement, Adivasi students had stood shoulder to shoulder with their peers against the oppressive gaze of the then-authoritarian government. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

# How are Indigenous people faring in the new Bangladesh?



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How many people genuinely care about the state of Indigenous communities in the “new Bangladesh,” which claims to be free from discrimination? Indigenous students and activists joined the July movement with hope, ambition, and passion. Yet, the events following the fall of the fascist government on August 5 serve as a stark reminder that many people in the country still resist inclusion of Indigenous people.

Due to the discriminatory policies of the Pakistani government, the people of this country fought against injustice and won their freedom in 1971. However, in the very Bangladesh that emerged from that struggle, the constitution was drafted without fully recognising the voices of the hardworking masses, the marginalised labourers, and the diverse ethnic communities.

From the moment of independence,

labelled as “lagging behind.”

Now, in this new, non-discriminatory Bangladesh, the real question remains: have these people merely fallen behind, or have they been systematically deprived? Even after 53 years of independence, why are they still pushed to the margins, labelled as weak and disadvantaged? The state must answer.

The July uprising claimed thousands of lives, with many more left injured. Yet, despite such immense sacrifice, incidents of violence erupted in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) within just a month. In September, lives were lost in Khagrachari and Rangamati. More than 50 people were injured, over 100 shops were reduced to ashes, and homes were set ablaze, vandalised, and looted. These events deepened the crisis of trust in the hills. The students who had joined the July uprising with dreams of a non-discriminatory Bangladesh were instead confronted with

- » Despite Bangladesh’s claim of being a non-discriminatory nation, Indigenous communities continue to face systemic exclusion, violence, and marginalisation in both the hills and plains.
- » Indigenous students actively participated in the July movement, yet they were soon confronted with the same oppressive structures, including restrictions on their rights and violent attacks.
- » Indigenous children, particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, suffer from high dropout rates due to poverty, language barriers, corruption, and inadequate infrastructure.
- » The 2022 census recorded a suspicious decline in the Indigenous population, raising concerns over possible underreporting or misrepresentation.
- » Bangladesh must move beyond symbolic gestures and ensure meaningful inclusion of Indigenous voices in governance, education, and development policies.



Indigenous and working-class people in Bangladesh have continued to face discrimination. Although the constitution states that “all citizens are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection under it,” the reality has been far from equal. These communities have never been viewed through the same lens by the state. Instead, they are often

disappointment again.

After the July uprising, when young people across the country were expressing their emotions through graffiti, students in the CHT were denied that right. Not only were they prevented from painting graffiti, but they were also dictated to on what to paint and which slogans to write. These restrictions on hill students make it clear:

◀ **As Indigenous protesters marched towards the NCTB in protest, they were brutally attacked by members of the so-called ‘Students for Sovereignty.’**

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

the spectre of the old fascist government still looms over the hills.

At the time, students voiced their frustration. Shawni Marma questioned, “Students across Bangladesh are drawing graffiti. So why are students in the Chittagong Hill Tracts being discriminated against?” Similarly, Jhumka Chakma expressed concern, saying, “We don’t want the hills to be destroyed in the name of development. Has the country’s independence only been for the plains? Will we never have freedom in the hills?” (*The Daily Star Bangla*, August 18, 2024).

If we look at the plains, there have been reports of attacks, looting, vandalism, and arson in at least 20 areas across the northern region since August 5. These incidents occurred in various districts, including Rajshahi, Naogaon, Dinajpur, Thakurgaon, and Chapainawabganj. During this time, the sculpture of Sidhu Kanu—revered heroes of the anti-British movement in Bengal—was demolished. In addition, houses belonging to the Santal community were set on fire and looted in Pipalla Santal village of Birol upazila, Dinajpur. The Dinajpur district administration acknowledged the vandalism and looting of indigenous homes. However, it remains unclear whether any action has been taken

against those responsible.

The latest incident that caused a nationwide uproar occurred on January 15 in the capital, Dhaka. The controversy stemmed from the removal of graffiti drawn by students during the July uprising on the back pages of ninth- and tenth-grade textbooks. The artwork depicted a tree symbolising indigenous identity, and its erasure sparked protests among indigenous students. As they marched towards the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) in protest, they were brutally attacked by members of the so-called “Students for Sovereignty.” Several indigenous students sustained serious injuries.

During the July movement, these Adivasi students had stood shoulder to shoulder with their peers against the oppressive gaze of the then-authoritarian government. Yet, within just six months, some people had already turned against them, embracing fascist tendencies and directing their aggression towards the Adivasi students. This raises an urgent question that we find ourselves asking repeatedly—how have Indigenous people truly fared in this so-called new, non-discriminatory Bangladesh?