

Where do Indigenous peoples belong in the new Bangladesh?



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Just over a year after the historic July uprising that once again split Bangladesh into a before-and-after timeline, the country finds itself at a critical juncture where we ask ourselves, “Who are we?” This search for identity in a new Bangladesh feels urgent. Yet, in this national reimagining, another pressing question remains: whose histories will be remembered, and whose will be erased?

I was reminded of this tension while facilitating a session organised by Supporting People and Rebuilding Communities (SPaRC), where 24 youth from 16 Indigenous communities came together to explore questions of culture, belonging, and power. The experience forced me to confront the privileges of my own identity as a Bangalee Muslim woman that merits its own deeper delve, but maybe another time.

What stayed with me from that day and what I want to reflect on today is a moment that cut through the abstractions of dialogue and made the stakes of belonging painfully real—one that asks that I approach this topic with as much humility as I can muster, given the privilege I hold in relation to the identities I am about to discuss.

In one of the exercises, where participants were asked to present what culture is “ours” and what is “theirs,” a young Oraon man made the claim that nakshi kantha—the iconic embroidered quilt so often celebrated as “quintessentially Bangalee”—is indigenous to their community. Whether historically accurate or not, his assertion made me reflect on how the cultural fabric of Bangladesh is not uniform but rather stitched together from multiple threads, some of which have been systematically denied, an erasure that can be both cultural and material. Later that



To deny Indigenous peoples the right to their own language, culture, freedom, and dignity would be to betray the foundation of the nation. FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

night, Coke Studio Bangla released its now-controversial song *Baaji*, further deepening my discomfort as discussions on cultural appropriation, tokenism, and the politics of representation emerged within activist communities.

The Oraon, Chakma, Marma, Santal, Garo, Mro, Bawm, and other Indigenous peoples carry histories older than this state. Their languages, rituals, and oral traditions have survived in the hills and plains, but in our national imagination, they are often rendered invisible, or reduced to a choreographed view comprising embroidery motifs, staged

These incidents included a wide range of violations—from attempted land seizures and expansion of security camps to the occupation of 130 acres of Jhum and fruit plantations belonging to 39 families, and even the seizure of a Buddhist temple site following the felling of 300 trees. In the Hill Tracts, over 27 years after the Peace Accord, militarisation continues, and promises of land restitution remain unfulfilled. In 2024, the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) documented over 200 human rights violations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts affecting 6,055 Jumma people, including

21 deaths, 119 houses and shops burned or looted, and 2,314 acres of land forcibly occupied, confirming that dispossession and violence remain disturbingly routine.

And as usual, women with Indigenous identities bear the brunt of this systemic aggression—through rape, intimidation, and targeted attacks that are rarely addressed. Even documentation or media coverage remains fraught and inadequate. According

Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF), as reported by Amnesty International. Latest reports say many of the detainees, including women and children, remain under arrest for over 500 days and counting. Their prolonged detention constitutes a disproportionately harsh and unjust response, targeting an entire community for the activities conducted by a small group.

Official documents continue to label Indigenous peoples as “ethnic minorities,” thereby denying their rootedness and legitimacy. This denial is systemised. Indigenous languages disappear under the weight of Bangalee (and western) dominance; oral histories fade without institutional support; school curricula erase the stories of Indigenous resistance. What remains is often appropriated and repackaged within the national narrative to fit the sensitivities of the majority.

So, going back to my uncomfortable moment of reflection when I listened to the young Oraon man claim the nakshi kantha as theirs. Maybe his claim wasn't so much an attempt at reclaiming ownership, but an act of resistance against the machinery of cultural appropriation. Maybe it was meant to serve as a reminder that promises of equity have repeatedly excluded Indigenous peoples. That their homes were seized, their practices commodified without credit, and their demands for self-determination dismissed as threats. Maybe it was a way of insisting that their histories and identities, too often invisible, cannot simply be highlighted when convenient and ignored when inconvenient.

So, where do they fit in the changing narrative of a new Bangladesh?

Bangladesh was born out of a struggle for the right to one's own language, culture, freedom, and dignity. To deny Indigenous peoples any of these rights would be to betray the foundation of the nation. If a new Bangladesh is to emerge—one that is whole, not fractured—it must honour Indigenous belonging. That means proper land restitution, accountability for violence, and respect for Indigenous rights and identities. Otherwise, the story of this nation will remain incomplete.

Hope and despair cloud the prospect of February polls



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Bangladesh appears to be getting pulled in opposite directions by two political currents, creating a contradictory mood about the immediate future of the country. At the centre of this apparent tug of war is the timing as well as purpose of the next election.

The source of one of the currents is the optimism generated by the announcement of a February date for the election, with the Election Commission recently unveiling a “roadmap” to finish all preparations beforehand. With the polls less than six months away, a lot of people are hopeful that the uncertainty that has hung over the country for the past year or so will dissipate once an elected government assumes power.

The other, pessimistic current derives its strength from the apprehension that a chain of events may be unleashed to derail the election or make it so controversial as to ignite yet another period of chaos and agitation. Such apprehensions are just as legitimate as the reasons for optimism, as they are rooted in the behaviour and pronouncements of some key political players. These raise doubts about the interim government's ability to

stick to its declared timetable.

Even though about 50 parties are currently registered with the Election Commission (with 147 more having applied for registration ahead of the upcoming polls), in reality, the opinion of no more than three or four parties matter to any great extent. These parties are engaged in a battle of wills, each seeking to shape the election to their advantage, thus contributing to the ebb and flow of the contradictory currents.

The biggest of these parties, of course, is the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). It has always been vocal about elections under a neutral, caretaker government, for which their leaders and workers suffered enormous repression for over a decade. They appear most keen among the major players to ensure that the election takes place in February, but they are also acutely aware of the obstacles ahead.

“We have extended all cooperation to the government, did not create any obstacles anywhere,” BNP leader Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir told a meeting at the National Press Club on August 27. “Unfortunately, some

political circles today are purposefully raising some new demands in an attempt to hamper the elections... They are raising such demands with which the people of the country are not familiar.”

It is not difficult to figure out which political circles or demands Mirza Fakhrul was talking about. In recent weeks, two other major political forces have been increasingly vocal about what they see as the inadequacies of an election in February: Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizen Party (NCP).

There is no doubt that Jamaat has emerged as a key player in post-Sheikh Hasina Bangladesh. It has been one of the major beneficiaries of the anti-Hasina movement's success. In principle, Jamaat does not seem to have anything against a February date for polls. In fact, its leaders were among the first to suggest a “pre-Ramadan” election. But lately, their public uttering has cast doubt about their sincerity. During a major rally in Dhaka on July 19, Jamaat tabled a list of seven demands, which were headed by a call for the next election to be held under a proportional representation (PR) system—something the BNP flatly refuses to support. Jamaat also wants implementation of reforms before the polls.

It is not clear whether Jamaat would boycott the polls if they are not held under a PR system, but they have created enough uncertainty about their intentions by threatening a “movement” if their demands are not met.

The NCP, which was formed by student leaders who were at the forefront of last year's movement against Hasina, has gone a few

steps further in creating uncertainty about the elections. At various times, NCP leaders have demanded that the next election be held to elect a constituent assembly, whose role would be to draw up a new constitution. This raises many questions. The demand for a constituent assembly could be seen as a tactic to prolong the lifetime of the current interim regime. In the unlikely event that the election is indeed held to elect a constituent assembly, Prof Muhammad Yunus and his council of advisers would likely remain in charge until a new constitution is promulgated and the election is held under the provisions of that constitution to elect a new parliament and government.

No other party supports, at least publicly, such a demand. But the NCP's apparently belligerent position increases pressure on the Yunus government. Although NCP's support among the population is still unknown and untested, their influence in the interim government and in the wider political scene cannot be overestimated. The NCP, which can't shake off the “King's Party” label, believes that the July Charter—which is basically a list of the major reform proposals that have been agreed upon during deliberations by the National Consensus Commission—should be given “legal basis” before any election.

Most recently, the party has suggested holding simultaneous polls for the parliament and a constituent assembly, after granting “legal basis” to the July Charter. “If this task can be completed by February, we are ready for elections in February,” NCP leader Nahid Islam told reporters at Dhaka airport on August 27. This leaves their intention about

the election shrouded in a smoke of doubt. The NCP evidently does not want the fate of constitutional reforms to be left to an elected parliament. They want the July Charter to be the basis for a new constitution, which cannot even be challenged in a court of law. That in itself is likely to sow the seeds of future unrest.

For its part, the BNP has made it clear that it has no problem with the interim regime implementing legal reforms through ordinances, but all reforms requiring amendment to the constitution should be left to the elected national assembly. They see the demands for a PR system or elections for a constituent assembly as mere manoeuvres. “Demanding PR or a constituent assembly is a political tactic, and these statements are aimed at stirring up the field,” senior BNP leader Salahuddin Ahmed told reporters on August 26.

The question now is, to what end are these demands being made? And how likely are they to push back the date for the election?

Any deviation from the February deadline would serve to prolong the life of the interim regime. This may please a section within the government and their allies, but further delays to holding the election would breed the same kind of frustration that the nation observed once Sheikh Hasina abolished the caretaker system in 2011. It is important for Prof Yunus to understand that his task at this critical juncture is to hold a free and fair election in February, and peacefully transfer power to the elected government. The task of implementing reforms is best left in the hands of the elected representatives, and not to commissions he appointed.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

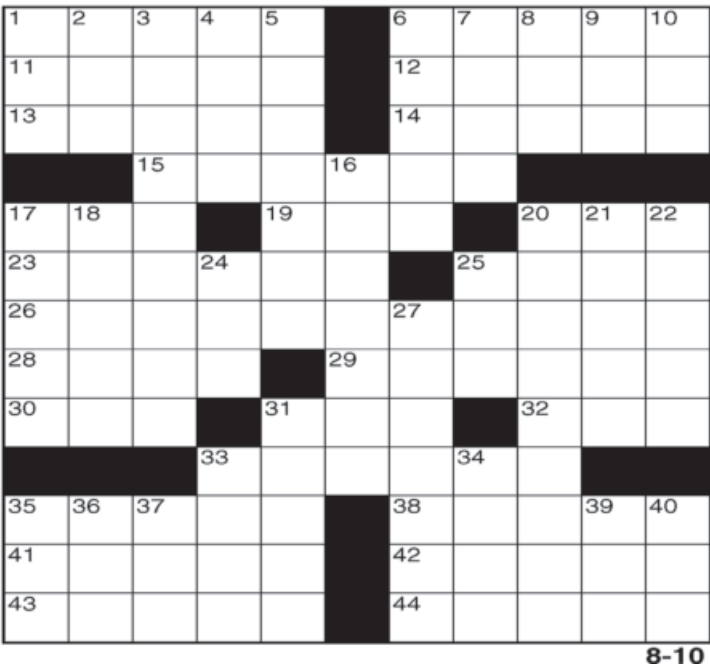
- 1 Viking of the comics
- 6 “Hotline Bling” rapper
- 11 In the know
- 12 Desert spots
- 13 Principle
- 14 Pulls along
- 15 Mechanic's place
- 17 - relief
- 19 One or more
- 20 Whale group
- 23 Unbroken
- 25 Face feature
- 26 “Licensed to Ill” hip-hop group
- 28 Brown songbird
- 29 Top-notch
- 30 Mess up
- 31 Add up

DOWN

- 32 “- your loss!”
- 33 Reclining seat
- 35 Eminem collaborator
- 38 Wanderer
- 41 In the lead
- 42 Skip the ceremony
- 43 Fails miserably
- 44 Very serious
- 1 Derby or boater
- 2 Reverent wonder
- 3 “Mass Appeal” hip-hop duo
- 4 Region
- 5 Take back
- 6 Potentially dangerous
- 7 Steak choice
- 8 High - kite
- 9 Tapped item

10 Snaky shape

- 16 Island near Barbuda
- 17 Preacher's book
- 18 Lend - (hear out)
- 20 “Survival Kit” hip-hop group
- 21 To date
- 22 Buttes' kin
- 24 Inquire
- 25 Magic org.
- 27 White weasels
- 31 Throws off
- 33 Beach crawler
- 34 Song for one
- 35 Bit of ointment
- 36 P lookalike
- 37 Rep.'s rival
- 39 Zoo beast
- 40 German article



SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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