Adivasi of Bangladesh:

Catching the Elusive Dream to Self-Determined Development

“I now realize that we have the same problems and issues on landgrabbing and we are not the only people who are experiencing threats of cultural extinction in this country,” laments Sufal Chakma of the Chittagong Hill Tracts or CHT of Bangladesh.

Mr. Chakma refers to landgrabbing issues shared by the Munda people in the coastal areas of Bangladesh. (The CHT, on the other hand, is a hilly and forested region in the southeastern part of the country.)

“Landgrabbing is a product of complex and interrelated problems that ultimately comes from the non-recognition of our rights as indigenous peoples” says Parendralal Tripura of Kagrachari, CHT.

“Settlers from the lowlands come with permission from the government, backed by the military. We have to constantly guard our backs in our own homes. How unfortunate can that be?” he added.

In the process of the establishment of the Bangladesh state, indigenous peoples—called Adivasi—had no meaningful participation in defining their own territories’ boundaries and
how this will be governed, according to Dipujjal Khisa of Maleya Foundation, a CHT-based indigenous peoples’ organization.

Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971. As a result, the Adivasi were separated from each other, some becoming residents of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The indigenous peoples of Bangladesh have historically asserted their rights to their lands and resources, eventually leading to armed conflict in the CHT since the 70s. In 1997, the Government of Bangladesh signed the CHT Peace Accord that aimed to instill peace in the region. Almost two decades after the accord, however, indigenous peoples are still crying for peace in their land.

Several Adivasi from 16 indigenous peoples’ communities all over Bangladesh gathered together in a workshop on Indigenous Peoples’ Sustainable, Self-Determined Development in Dhaka last August 2014. The workshop was co-organized by Maleya and Tebtebba, a global indigenous peoples’ institution working on rights and development.

**Criminalizing livelihoods**

Participants shared other issues such as the criminalization of jhum cultivation. Jhum cultivation or rotational farming has been the practice of the indigenous peoples in the CHT.

Here, they grow up to 65 varieties of crops for family consumption. Some are
innovating and are planting fruit bearing trees in their fields to compensate for the decreasing land area due to landgrabs.

Manishapun, who lives in the plain lands near the border with Burma, shares how they are blamed for deforestation: “The government accuses us of degrading the forest but would allow settlers to come and do as they wish. What other proof should we present to show that we were actually the ones who conserved the forest for such a long time? We are the reason why we still have forests intact in this country.”

Mr. Zuamlai Amlai, an indigenous Bawm from the CHT, said that the grave problems that the world is facing now are harder for indigenous peoples to bear. “We learned that we contributed least to this crises but we are the most affected. This is not fair,” he added. The workshop discussed the current environmental and development problems the world is facing.

Most of the participants expressed that it was their first time to hear about international agreements on the environment (Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change). Likewise, only a few of the participants were familiar with their rights as spelled out in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The UNDRIP was adopted by governments belonging to the UN in 2007.

**Dire rights situation**

On August 9, 2014, a human rights activist who joined the World’s Indigenous Peoples’ Day celebration in Khagrachari, CHT disappeared the next day, according to some participants. Witnesses said the army allegedly took him, together with four others, for questioning. A day after they were taken, the man was declared dead from accidentally hitting himself on a tree, according to the army report.

“The army then said no one has been claiming the body so they had him cremated a day after,” a representative from Khagrachari bemoaned.

Another participant shared how a Bengali lowland settler allegedly beat an indigenous man after they had an altercation on land ownership. Afterwards, the settler came back with more people and took advantage of the man’s wife. The community took the case to the local government, who in turn said it would look into the matter; but nothing happened.

“The apathy of the government encourages settlers to take advantage of us,” he added.
Another participant said that he was “happy to have learned about the reporting mechanisms of human rights violations. It is important for us to be clear about what to report, how to do it and where to report to.” He was referring to the session on how to report human rights violations to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples. The Special Rapporteur is one of the means by which indigenous peoples can file complaints with the UN on violations of their rights.

“Here we are, talking about many issues we have been experiencing. They have new names now but they are still the same old problems we know. Now, we understand that the reason why we have them is that they are all interconnected to each other,” said Mr. Amlai.

Committing to the dream

The dream of achieving a development that addresses and fulfills their needs may have been elusive in the past, but the Adivasi participants were keen on doing their share in making this aspiration a reality. They agreed to strengthen their communities and form a network on human rights.

As Hamum Tonubabu, a participant, stated, “Development for us is not about money, because you can be very rich but unhappy. But what we want is freedom. We want to be free from sorrow and pain. We want to sleep at night knowing that our children will be better off than we are now. Development means having cultural freedom.” (Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service - Helen Biangalen-Magata)