

Proceedings

**Engaging the Ethnic minorities in
National Development: Way Forward**

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Organised by



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Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) organised a seminar titled “Engaging the Ethnic Minorities in National Development: Way Forward” on 04 May 2016 at BISS Auditorium. **Mr. H. T. Imam**, Political Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, graced the occasion as the Chief

Guest while **Mr. Naba Bikram kishore Tripura**, ndc, Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, chaired the session. **Professor Anwar Husain**, Department of History, University



of Dhaka was the key note speaker. **Major General Md. Abdur Rashid (Retd.)**, **Major General Ashab Uddin, ndc, psc (Retd.)** and **Mohammad A. Arafat**, Chairman, Suchinta Foundation, were the designated discussants. **Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc**, Director General, BISS delivered the address of welcome. **Ambassador Mushi Fiaz Ahmed**, Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS concluded the seminar with a vote of thanks. Scholars, academicians, policy makers, former and current government officials were present in the seminar and participated actively in the open discussion.

Opening Remarks by the Session Chair



Mr. Naba Bikram Kishore Tripura, ndc, Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs said that the engagement of ethnic communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in development and governance of the region has been ensured by adopting new laws and regulations. It is embedded in the organisational structures of the Chittagong Hill Tracts institutions. Two-third members of the CHT Council including chairman have to be from the ethnic communities. The Minister of the CHT Affairs has to be from the ethnic community. It is also to be chaired by the competent person

from the ethnic community as per the commission of the CHT peace accord. The traditional leadership of the CHT that is circle chiefs are engaged in different development programmes of the districts as well. In respect of engagement in the national development initiatives the ethnic minorities of the hill tracts are much more privileged than their counterparts of the plains.

The Government is committed to creating a more inclusive and equitable society through the inclusion of ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities into the national and social development agenda. Government of Bangladesh has developed a Strategic Framework for the Sustainable Development goals for the Chittagong Hill Tracts which has been reflected in the 7th Five Year Plan of Bangladesh. The goals include: empowering ethnic communities, access to education and culture, special programs for achieving strategic goals, rural development and non-farm economic activities, human resource development, internet facilities, development of tourism, adaptation to climate change, afforestation and so forth. The legal and institutional arrangements are fine, but the real challenge lies in the implementation mechanism. The government has a comprehensive plan for the development of CHT.

Address of Welcome



Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc, Director General, BISS in his Address of Welcome stated that Different ethnic groups and their colourful lifestyles have significantly enriched the entire culture of Bangladesh. Ethnic minorities are those people whose linguistic and cultural background is different from the linguistic and cultural background of the mainstream population. For centuries, Bangladesh has been the dwelling place of different ethnic groups who are living in different pockets of the

hilly zones and some areas of the plane lands of Bangladesh. He added that the participation of ethnic minorities in the national development programmes is now being increasingly emphasized in developing national policies. Accordingly, the policy makers have realised the need for including the ethnic communities in the development projects designed for the areas where these people live. Nevertheless, being small ethnic groups they deserve their share in the fruits of development initiatives. However, for the successful implementation of vision 2021, decision-making capacity, participation, creativity, knowledge, and livelihoods of the ethnic minorities need to be prioritised.

He stressed that adequate information on social organization, inter-cultural symbiosis, nature and trends of political, economic and other changes of various ethnic groups is necessary to engage them in national development process. For the proper planning and implementation of national development programmes, Bangladesh needs to identify; how they can actively participate in development process, hindrances to their participation and ways to overcome those obstacles. It is also important to value the perspective of the ethnic communities in the construction of knowledge within the process of people-centred-development.

Keynote Presentation



Professor Dr. Syed Anwar Hussain, Department of History, University of Dhaka, said that around less than two percent of the population of Bangladesh comprises about fifty groups of people officially termed as ethnic minorities. While calling them so the cultural distinctiveness is recognized. But it is not clear whether civilisational attributes of these people are taken into consideration. Indeed each of these groups bear rich civilisational heritage dating back to centuries. It is therefore essential to say

that these groups of people add rich dimensions to the eclectic civilisational and cultural milieu of Bangladesh. As per the constitution of the republic, they are entitled to get civilisational rights and privileges. But as backward communities, they have, as per the constitution, entitlement to extra care from the establishment. Much has done over the years to mainstream these people and also integrate them with the overall developmental process of the century. But the ineluctable truth is that much remains to be done and it should be done in the right way to ensure satisfaction of these people. In doing so the establishment is required to be sincere and committed to the best of its ability.

While talking about these people in terms of development it is posited. That development is itself a holistic and participatory construct and process. Again, development should not be confused with growth; which unfortunately is frequently done. In fact, development is growth with equity. This distinct from mere growth, development addresses all the people across a country. In the case of such a development strategy the ethnic minorities in question are supposed not to be left out. The onus is therefore, on the establishment. The fact to be faced is that despite our wish we have not had an assuring track-record in mainstreaming these minority people and of which, this seminar is a well-meaning proof.

He added that our limitation has been in strategic communication with the stakeholders. Strategic communication means sending out adequate feelers to the stakeholder before any policy is formulated about them. Again, it also means due weightage is to be given to the feedback from the stakeholders before the policy is finalized and set for implementation. A seminar such as this is a good starting point for strategic communication. Of the territories inhabited by these minority people, CHT is as the Achilles' heel for the establishment in Bangladesh and this has been so during the pre and post-peace periods. The two and a half decades long insurgency was brought to an end through successful strategic communication as evidenced through the series dialogue. But as elsewhere in the world, peace building has proved to be more an intractable task than peacemaking. Consequently, peace on paper, peace on ground has remained so far as Chimera. What has gone wrong? Primarily and apparently, it may be suggested that a good communication had paved the way for the long-awaited peace deal. But the failure of strategic communication in the post- peace period has spelt disaster for the peace-

building process. Moreover, the rise of UPDF, as a counter body to PCJSS and its ubiquitous activities are also hindrances to the peace building process. More often than not, the PCJSS came up with the non-implementation of peace deal accusation against the government. This is a serious challenge to be responded to adequately. One way to meeting this challenge may be to hold public hearing, by the relevant parliamentary standing committee with two specific agenda what has so far been done and what needs to be done. The committee should hear the hill stakeholders, civil society members and relevant academics. The inputs and outputs of such a hearing should be considered with due weightage before the government decides future course of actions.

He noted that the land is the crux of the CHT problem. The land commission tasked to sort out the problem has been either dysfunctional or non-functional. In the absence of land ownership documents of hill people survey is a difficult task. But given sincerity and commitment, the problem however intractable is beyond the solution. If not hundred percent satisfactory some kind of solution can be thrashed out through well-meaning dialogue between the land commission and the hill people. There is a problem in hill people's demand to be recognized as *adivasis*, which the government has not met for understandable reasons. They are historically not *adivasis*; but they are diverse people having exogenous origins. But *adivasis* or no, they are citizens of Bangladesh with full entitlement of citizenship rights and privileges. The government should be in dialogue with the hill people to drive home these stark realities. The army in the CHT region, although scaled down as per the peace treaty, is objected to by the hill people. But they need to be made understand. That in a security-vulnerable region like the CHT, army presence cannot be dispensed with. Moreover, evidentially, barring some reported excesses, the army has rendered laudable social, educational and medical services to win the hearts and minds of the people. The regional council set up under the peace treaty was forward looking step. But, experience shows, the body need to be strong financially and administratively. Consequently, the principle of decentralization, devolution, the arrangement is not found to be working properly. Fresh thoughts are needed to revisit the arrangement. While saying so a point is made as to the constitutional anomaly that has been created by the council. Article 1 of the constitution of Bangladesh provides for unitary state wherein there cannot be any regional body. Therefore, the regional council is at variance with the spirit of the constitution. The problem can be overcome by changing the regional council into the hill council. Contrarily, the constitution can be amended but that will open Pandora's Box. Of the two ways, the former is logically realistic.

These being said, he highlighted that two general recommendations may be made. First, the minority people should be allowed to pursue up to primary level education in their respective languages. But some communities have lost their languages. In that case they should be allowed to use the language they speak. Moreover, there may be cases of languages without scripts. In such a case linguists may be consulted. As per the UNESCO resolution of 1999 Bangladesh is duty-bound to patronize linguist pluralism. To implement such a proposal Bangladesh may have to set up a separate textbook board to produce teaching materials in minority languages. Second, there should be slots in television channels to highlight cultural heritage of minority peoples. Above all, government policies should be framed as to make these people feel that they belong to Bangladesh and its citizenry.

Discussions



Major General Md. Abdur Rashid (Retd.) said that without integrating the ethnic minority people into the mainstream development process, one cannot ensure the real development. He also opined that, the question of “*adibashi*” or “tribal” is still unsettled and this could be solved by arranging dialogues. He put emphasis on the future relations of settlers and local inhabitants. He opined that people often overlooked the importance of the presence of military. But military has played an important role to the development of hill

tracts. For this reason there should be a difference between local government and military. He also gave some recommendations for engaging the ethnic minorities in national development process i.e. sharing same mentality, ensuring ethnic minorities’ participation in development process and giving equal opportunity to them etc. He added that Bangladesh is showing a milestone in engaging the ethnic minority people in development process.

Major General Mohammad Ashab Uddin, ndc, psc (Retd.) stated that different ethnic



groups of Bangladesh and their lifestyles have significantly enriched the entire culture of Bangladesh. He added that approximately 3 million people are ethnic minorities belonging to 54 different ethnic groups. These peoples are concentrated in the North, and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the South-East of the country. There are eleven/twelve ethnic groups who have been living in Chittagong Hill Tracts regions since the past. They are Chakmas, Marma, Tripura, Mro, Tanchanga, Bawm, Pangkhua, Chak, Khyang, Khumi and

Lushai. Garo, Hajong and Koch are living in the North and North-east parts of Bangladesh especially in the greater Mymensingh. The Khasia, Patra and Manipuri group are living in Sylhet region. The Santal, Oraro, Mahali, Malo, Mondaare living in Dinajpur, Rangpur, Rajshahi, Bogra and Pabna. Besides, the Rakhaine group are living in Cox’s Bazar, Patuakhali and Borguna in the South-east part in Bangladesh.”

He said that defining “indigenous peoples” still is a global debate. United Nations human rights bodies, ILO, international law apply four criteria to distinguish indigenous people. These are:

1. Indigenous peoples usually live within geographically distinct ancestral territories.

2. They tend to maintain distinct social, economic and political institutions within their territories.
3. They typically aspire to remain distinct culturally, geographically and institutionally rather than assimilate fully into a national society.
4. They self-identify as indigenous or tribal.

He also argued that the term ‘indigenous people’, ‘indigenous ethnic minorities’, and ‘tribal groups’ are used to describe social groups that share similar characteristics, namely a social and cultural identity that is distinct from dominant groups in society.” He said that there is no constitutional recognition of the ethnic minority people of Bangladesh. They are only referred to as “backward segments of the population.” The 15th amendment of constitution refers to indigenous peoples as tribes (upajati), minor races (khudro jatishatta), ethnic sects and communities (nrigoshti o shomprodai). He also referred about article 6.2 and article 23(a) of our constitution. Article 6.2 has stated that all the people of Bangladesh will be known as Bangalees. Article 23(a) has recognised tribal people as small ethnic groups not as *adivasis*. He identified some of the major problems of minority people in Bangladesh like poor health of minority people, poor educational opportunities, life expectancy, less employment options, disputes on land ownership.

He recognised present contributions of the minority people in socio-economic development. According to him, minority people has a great contribution on Exclusive Economic Zone (EPZ) sector, tourism sector, beauty salon, business sector, various government job, garments sector, corporate sector and media. He gave some suggestions for engaging the ethnic minorities in national development process such as: arranging employment and income generating activities, ensuring security on land ownership, establishing sufficient number of schools, empowering women, ensuring their participation in decision making process and protection of cultural heritage.



Mohammad A. Arafat, Chairman, Suchinta Foundation, said that in a democracy, government is supposed to represent everyone irrespective of majority or minority. Therefore, the division between ‘we’ and ‘they’ is unnecessary. Ethnic minority issue has certain psychological aspects that need more protection and extra care. Not only economic development but also development of values is vital. A well distributed development is important for the ethnic minorities. Democratic

government has to pay more attention to the most deprived section of the country which is the ethnic minority groups.

He pointed out the debate between the terms indigenous population and tribal population. He argued that the Bengali version of the tribal population sounds strange which is ‘*upojati*’. The

government has done commendable job by replacing the word ‘*upojati*’ by another terminology. When it comes to indigenous population, the definition suggests that in this land both Bengali and ethnic minorities are in a way indigenous people. If the Red Indians in America are regarded as indigenous people than the rest of the people are by default considered to be migrant population. If certain people are pointed as indigenous people than the rest of the population of this land becomes migrants. So, these debates should be avoided. In conclusion he said that things should be done and settled in terms of fairness. When Martin Luther King was fighting for the civil rights movement white people also participated not for their personal benefit but for fairness. So, whatever is done it has to be done on the basis of fairness which is to protect the interest of everyone.

Open Discussion



Showvik Das Tamal, Protection Associate, UNHC, pointed out that the whole discussion of this seminar was based on only one corner of the country which is the Chittagong Hill Tracts, situated in the South-east corner of the country. He wanted to draw attention to another corner which is Thakurgaon, Dinajpur where the Santal community and other ethnic communities live where little initiatives had been taken to address their problems. He raised a question of what is the way forward to include these minority people in the development process.

In response to his remarks, **Mr. Naba Bikram kishore Tripura**, Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, stated that ethnic minorities of CHT area are more privileged. They have their own ministry, hill district council and regional council. They also have Chittagong Development Board and their last year development budget was BDT 510 crore. But for the ethnic minorities living in other places, there is a very small cell in the Prime Minister Office and they get allocation of BDT 20 crore per year. So they are more disadvantaged. He also agreed to increase the number of institutions for those minority communities to oversee their development.

Tarikul Islam, Lecturer, Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, said that national integration is crucial issue. Bangladesh needs to ensure that every stakeholder and valued citizen irrespective of religions, ethnicity should be included in the integration process. It is because development is a multidimensional approach. Development should be irrespective of majority, minority, ethnicity, religion and others.





Professor Mesbah Kamal, Department of History, University of Dhaka, said that the ethnic minority communities are one of the poorest and underdeveloped groups and the allocated budget is inadequate for their development. The country's two-thirds of ethnic minority people live in the plains, but they do not have any protection from any ministry as the CHT Affairs only look after the minority of the hill. To overcome the problem, he suggested either the government can change the name of CHT Affairs to bring the minorities in plains also under its protection or can set

up a special division under the ministry to look after the ethnic people living in the plains. Furthermore, he pointed out that diversity is not reflected in the census of Bangladesh. The questionnaire is problematic which provides distinct categories for only 27 communities, which the government calls 'ethnic minority' groups. He suggested that there should be four categories namely indigenous people, small ethnic minorities, dalits and other backward communities.

Mr. Rashedul Haque, a university student, said that he is proud to be a '*pahari*'. He argued that Bangladesh should nurture the expert from CHT and should stop the brain drain. He also suggested the government to give more attention on the education system.



Ms Barnali Mallik, Staff Correspondent, Daily Observer, raised concern about not involving ethnic minorities in government's different tourism projects at CHT area.



In response to her concern, **Mr. Naba Bikram kishore Tripura**, Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, informed that local tourism is officially handed over to three district councils. It is now a subject

under hill district council. Government is also promoting eco-friendly community based tourism in that area.

Mehadi Hassan Palash, Chairman, CHT Research Foundation, said that the people in CHT are considered backward in education, but the present government has established a university in Rangamati and also a medical college has been established in CHT. The government of Bangladesh is keen to ensure development in the health, education and security sector of Bangladesh.



K.M. Jaloya said that the military played the leading role in the development of CHT. Undeniably for various reasons, the military is critical for maintaining the peace. The antagonistic attitude of many who are acting against peace is unacceptable. It is necessary to identify and fight those who are acting against peace.



Lieutenant Colonel Md. Shahadat Hossain, psc (Retd) Consultant and Promoter of Bangladesh-China Relations, suggested the government to start a cadastral survey to solve the land issue of CHT. He also requested the government to establish a tribal village like Kunming, China which could be a main attraction for tourists. He suggested the government to train the ethnic minority people for overseas manpower employment. Finally, he thought that, an indigenous people club is needed to be created for engaging them in intellectual purpose.



One of the participants from Bandarban informed that topics regarding languages of ethnic minorities of Bangladesh have been incorporated to the national curriculum and initiatives have also been taken to ensure that ethnic minorities' can have their preliminary education in their respective mother tongue. He also appreciated the role of army in the CHT area.



A. S. M. Firoz-Ul-Hasan, Assistant Professor, Department of Government and Politics, Jahangirnagar University, emphasised on comprehensive research in the areas relating to CHT and ethnic minority groups.



Address by the Chief Guest

Mr. H. T. Imam, Political Affairs Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister at the outset of his speech stated



that we are all citizens of Bangladesh. However, irrespective of Bengali nationalism, the constitution of Bangladesh also recognises the existence of other ethnic minorities. They enjoy equal rights and also protected under the constitution.

Mr. Imam divided the ethnic communities of Bangladesh into two groups. One group of people are living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area and others are living in different parts of the country. For instance, Santals are living in

Nababganj. They fought with Pakistan army initially with spears and arrows. He then talked

about Garos and Hazongs living in Mymensing area who also participated in the liberation war. He stressed that it is the responsibility of the majority to look after minority. The constitution of Bangladesh also ensures development for all people of Bangladesh irrespective of their colour, language, gender or location.

Mr. Imam then reminisced about the war of liberation in 1971 and his duty at that time as a Deputy Commissioner of Chittagong. He also described how difficult it was to communicate from one place to another in the CHT area on that time and the Mizo uprising in India. He stated that the problems that we faced today in CHT were created by the Pakistani Army. It was ISI who created the problems in CHT. After liberation, for years together, CHT was a happy hunting ground for the ISI and their representatives.

Mr Imam identified land contention as one of the major reasons of dispute in CHT area. The creation of Kaptai Hydropower Project was the heart of CHT area problem since the independence of Bangladesh. Because of the project, local people have lost not only their livelihood but also their houses where they used to live for generations. To assuage the problem, CHT rehabilitation project was initiated by the government. Most of development activities now a day in CHT area are the result of that rehabilitation project.

According to him, the problems of CHT area are not created overnight and they all have long history. One of the major problems was overreaching impact of ISI. They not only trained and armed Mizos but also tried to get involved in the local politics. And that created huge problem for Bangladesh. He also highlighted that the problem of ISI re-emerged in Bangladesh after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He added that ISI was allowed to operate in CHT area during the period of 2001-2006. Here, he criticised the international media for not disseminating full and real information regarding the progress and development of CHT area. Mr Imam referred to the action plan of upcoming 7th five year plan to depict the development and progress of the area.

Regarding other ethnic minorities living in the plain area of Bangladesh, Mr. Imam informed that there is a small cell in the Prime Minister's office to look after their development. But, he agreed with others that the amount which is allocated for their betterment is not enough and urged more allocation from them. He also informed the audience how the government is working to ensure higher participation of ethnic minorities in government administration. The government of Bangladesh has already decided to set up science and technology colleges in all 64 districts of Bangladesh and all three districts of CHT area will be benefited from that initiative. He stressed importance on development with equity in the CHT region and urged extra protection for the ethnic minorities living in the plain land.

In conclusion, Mr Imam said that he is extremely hopeful regarding sustainable and equitable development of ethnic minorities of Bangladesh and look forward for their active involvement in development process.

Vote of Thanks

Ambassador Mushi Fiaz Ahmed, Board of Governors, BISS, in his speech stressed



that inclusiveness is one of the most important pillars of sustainable development goals. Therefore, the question of including or engaging the ethnic minorities and ensuring their greater participation in all spheres of our development efforts has assumed new and greater significance.

According to him, when people say “Engaging the Ethnic minority” it could imply, by default that they are not being engaged. But the chair, chief guest, key note speaker pointed out that is not true. It is said that the ethnic minorities are engaged, thanks to various enabling policies and programmes by the government. He mentioned that the chair of this session is an example and there are many others in civil-military bureaucracy regularly joining the services and reaching the top. The current chief justice of the country is a member of one of the ethnic minority communities. There are many prominent members from the minority communities in the academia, media, business, sports, cultural area, politics including members of the parliament, local government bodies etc. Some special indices put many ethnic minorities ahead of the majority. While some members of the ethnic communities have been able to achieve considerable success, large numbers are still deprived, due to various reasons and challenges like language barrier, education, land settlement, health care, oppression and exploitation by the powerful, investment and inherent deficiencies and insular mindset of these communities and a fear of being absorbed assimilated beyond regulation.

He suggested that in order to ensure greater engagement or greater participation of the ethnic minorities in national development most important is to inculcate a greater sense of belongingness among them, to make them feel as stakeholders and partners based on equality, equity and fairness and dignity. It is equally important to remove their fears and help them integrate into the mainstream without sacrificing their ethnic and cultural identities and characteristics. One of the best ways to do so is to ensure their greater participation in the policy and decision making process, particularly in matter related to their community development and welfare and generally in matter of greater national development. He concluded his speech by thanking everyone.

Key Findings

The main finding of the seminar is enlisted here:

- The initiatives of the government have improved the socio-economic conditions of the ethnic minorities. To continue such process, government needs more inclusive policies. The CHT people should be included in the mainstream society by improving their capacity. It will help them to contribute more in the national economy.
- The inclusion of all sections of the ethnic minorities is necessary. In this respect, strategic communications among the stakeholders can help to forge a permanent and effective network to understand the demands and expectations of the ethnic minorities.
- A comprehensive research and understanding of the issues relating to ethnic minorities will facilitate policy makers to identify the real problems of them and it will facilitate government institutions work effectively.
- Promoting a greater sense of equality and equity would help the country to ensure an inclusive development process which will be beneficial for all the sections of the society.
- The problems and the differences among the stakeholders should be minimised by mutual discussions. The ethnic minorities should be given proper access in all the levels of the state where they can get their rights and obtain access in all the development activities.