

Security of Indigenous Women

The term indigenous people, indigenous women can only be understood in relation to a modern state. It denotes 'otherness', or out of the mainstream. The idea of a mainstream or homogenous population is inextricably linked with the modern state. Consequently those who live or choose to live outside this group remain marginalized. The failure of the state to accommodate its indigenous people is due to its built-in limitations. The state institutions and ethos are not conducive to accommodation rather they are built upon masculine ethos and values which celebrate and emphasize upon the values of autonomy, competition and power which again is equated with control and domination, as opposed to the feminist epistemology of accommodation, collective empowerment and collaboration.

At the conceptual level the state predicates itself on the ideology of nationalism. This too is exclusionary rather than inclusive. It emphasizes upon uniformity, homogeneity rather than diversity and plurality.

The above formulation of the state both at the institutional and conceptual levels makes the location of indigenous people quite problematic and precarious for the latter are people who continue to live their lives according to their own socio-economic practices, and often also within their own political structures. These practices and structures are at marked variance from the mainstream population of the state.

While the indigenous population suffers and is vulnerable in general within the structures and ideals of a modern state, the indigenous women are more vulnerable than men and suffer from insecurity in two major ways. First as women members of the state, since the state is based upon patriarchal values it privileges men and masculinity. Secondly, as members of the indigenous community. So, their lived experiences, insecurities also their struggles and perceptions of empowerment may not be necessarily at par with those of the mainstream women.

The processes of nation and state building in Bangladesh have impacted upon the indigenous women negatively. The following is a discussion of this contention.

(i) Development Displacement and Insecurity: The development paradigms of the state are often in conflict with the interests and values of the indigenous people. The former regards the resources of land and land itself as a commodity that needs to be exploited for profit; while for the latter these are sacrosanct. They regard it as the abode of their ancestors and their spirits. State development endeavors have often led to the displacement of the indigenous people from their land, which violates them both psychologically and physically and is major factor behind their insecurity. But as suggested earlier these affect the women more because of the masculine ethos of the state. The following will make this clear.

Forests: Forests constitute an integral part of the lives of the indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), and also of the Garo community of the plains of Bangladesh. In fact the latter claim themselves to be children of forests. Women use the forest resources for their day to day living as well as economic activities. The state has taken over vast tracts of forests as Reserve Forests (RF), it has also leased out forests for commercial purposes as well. This has displaced the indigenous people not only from their habitat but also deprived them of their sources of livelihood. The state has not created any alternative means of livelihood for the women who were dependent upon these resources. This not only means more laborious work for them, but also entails a change in their societal status. For instance the Garos are a matrilineal people. Women enjoyed a privileged position in this society. But now many of them are working as housemaids and in the beauty parlors of Dhaka city. This not only is a very sad predicament for these women, but also a big blow to their traditional societal structure. Many of them are marrying Bengali men, not only out of love but also for ensuring their security. The Garos regard this as a process of extinction of their race.

Apart from loss of status women also have been victims of sexual violence due to these displacements and development induced poverty. The Mahali women in Dinajpur due to their extreme poverty¹ became easy prey to

the contractors involved in the government forestry programmes. Garo women in the Birishiri thana, also became victims. Eighty per cent of the Garo families of this area are dependent upon forest resources for their survival. But most of the forests have been taken over by the state as RF. Still the women go there to collect fuel wood and food items. Also at times they cross the borders to collect forest resources from the other side. While doing so they are often caught by the BDR (Bangladesh Rifles, a para-military force) and the BSF (Border Security Forces of India) personnel. They are then forced to yield to the physical desires of these men. The Garo women have no redress as they have to maintain their families and children, who have become homeless due to the forest development projects of the state.²

In the CHT too it has led to wide displacements of population. Kheyang a forest living and forest dependent people have been barred from entering the forests where they had been living for generations. The state has acquired those forests as RF. Cases have been filed against many of them as illegal squatters. A people have not only been displaced from their land but have become illegal squatters in a land where they had been living for generations. This has placed the Kheyang women in a disadvantageous position and has put increasing pressure on them, as their men folk are afraid to go out so now they have to do their domestic chores as well as go to the market places, which they had not done before. Apart from the Kheyangs many of the Hill people are living as Internally Displaced People (IDPs) due to state acquisition of forests. Though a Task Force has been created after the CHT Peace accord for the rehabilitation of IDPs, but no special provision has been made for women headed households, whereas it is understandable that the latter are at a more vulnerable position.

Jhum: In the jhum or slash and burn mode of cultivation women enjoyed a more or less equal status vis-à-vis men due to the nature of distribution of labor and work. The state ban on jhum has put the women in a disadvantageous position. It has taken away their equal status vis-à-vis men, for jhum for them is not only a mode of cultivation but also a way of life. Men took to other employment opportunities like fishing and horticulture (though unsuccessful in the Hills), the women

were left without any work in the public sphere. This shrank their spaces as well as independence.

NGOs and Development: In the post accord situation in the CHT, many national NGOs like the BRAC, Proshika, IDF have started their activities in the Hills. The Hill people allege that their programmes are not in consonance with the traditions of the hill people. The micro credit programmes of these NGOs have come under sharp criticism due to their adverse impact on Hill women and the society at large. The Hill women allege that the rates of interests are extremely high, the Hill women do not have resources to pay them back, consequently many of them have taken to wine making. This on the one hand has negative impact on the youth on the other hand it has also increased violence against women.³

(ii) Militarisation and Insecurity: The refusal of the Hill people to identify and integrate themselves as Bengali nation led to an armed insurgency in the Hills in the early 70s. During the insurgency period women in the HT lived a life of insecurity, both psychological and physical. This insecurity continues even after a peace accord has been signed in December 1997, for the post accord CHT is neither peaceful nor secure. The state presence along with its military apparatus is still dominant in the Hills. The following is an exposition of this.

Change in gender roles: During conflict situation the divide between the public and the private shrinks and often collapses. Since men are the obvious targets and become more visible women take on the jobs of going to the public spheres, which are traditionally considered as men's domain. This puts them under tremendous physical and psychological pressure. For them it had become a *ghore baire juddho* (War inside and outside the house), as many Hill women had put to me in 1993 and again in 1994, when the conflict was still going on.

Militarisation and masculinisation: War conflict and militarisation strengthen the masculinised ethos of the society. This is also true for a society that is a victim of the above for while fighting the above forces it internalizes violence and militarisation. Many Hill women told me that in the post accord situation their society has become more violent and criminalized. Arms and drugs are easily available

today. Eve teasing was unknown in the Hills, but like a contagious disease it has spread in the Hills. The Hill women allege that their men have learnt it from the Bengali settlers and the security personnel deployed in the Hills. They further allege that formerly they used to feel insecure from Bengali men, now they feel insecure from their own men as well.

Rape: Rape has been used as an instrument of war. By violating a woman, not only her body is violated but the 'other' is also violated. The 'purity' and 'authenticity' of the nation so integral to it, is put under threat, since within the parlance of the nationalist discourse women are considered to be the biological bearers of the nation. In the CHT rape was inflicted upon the Hill women by Bengali security personnel. According to a report of the CHT Commission between 1991 and 1993 over 94 per cent of the rape cases of the Hill women were by the security personnel. Over 40 per cent of these women were under eighteen years of age.⁴ Despite the accord the Hill women continue to be sexually harassed and assaulted by Bengali security personnel and Bengali settlers.⁵ It is important to note here that the CHT peace accord has made no provision for the rehabilitation of the rape victims.

Abduction: During the conflict period many Hill women were abducted. Many Hill students (both boys and girls) of Dhaka University told me that they could not go to their homes in the Hills for fear of abduction. The abduction case of Kalpana Chakma, the Organising Secretary of HWF (Hill Women's Federation) in 1996, on the eve of the general elections is the most publicized one. The ultimate fate and whereabouts of Kalpana is still unknown today.

Refugees: During the insurgency period about 54,000 Hill people crossed over to India as refugees and around 50,000 became internal refugees or IDPs. Many of these refugee households were headed by women as men had either gone to war or had been killed. Life for them in the refugee camps was one of extreme anxiety and poverty. Yet many of the women were unwilling to come back after the accord because the sense of insecurity with which they had left their homes continued to haunt them.⁶ They have come back to a very polarized situation. Needless to say that the accord has made no provision for women headed house holds of refugees.

(iii) Women as Agencies of Change and Empowerment: The conflict/insurgency in the HT has led to intense politicization of women. They have been associated with the political struggle for the emancipation and autonomy of the Hill people and women rights from the very beginning. This however was (is) done within the nationalist framework of the Hill people. On 21 February 1975 a Mohila Parishad was formed by the PCJSS.⁷ Soon this body formed its auxiliary organs in almost all the villages in the remote areas of the HT. Later each village also constituted a Mohila Panchayet. Their membership was restricted to women only. They took up issues of oppression and violence against women. They also undertook political awareness raising programmes among the village women. This organization played an important role in raising support for the JSS among the women.

The HWF also played a crucial role in the movement of the Hill people. They took up cases of rape of the Hill women by the security personnel and brought them to the public forums. Through networking with the Bengali women organizations, they are carrying on the cause of the Hill women. Last year the HWF (UPDF group) published a book, *Paharer ruddho kontho* (silenced voices of women), narrating the lived experiences of trauma, fear and insecurities of the Hill women during insurgency. The same body published the diary of Kalpana Chakma in June 2001. Kalpana in fact has become a symbol of Hill people's struggles and sacrifices within the state of Bangladesh. It is indeed laudable that the Hill people could give recognition to their women martyrs, which we the Bengali nation have so far failed.

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Notes and References:

¹ *Muktokantho*, 6 December 1999.

² *Banglabazar Patrika*, 5 December 1999.

³ Kabita Chakma, President HWF (UPDF group) first made this allegation to me in a personal interview on 5.5.2001. This was later substantiated by almost all the Hill women I talked to during my visit to Rangamati and Khagrachari, in May 2001.

⁴ The CHT Commission. 1997. *Life is not ours' Land and Human Rights in the CHT, Bangladesh*. Denmark: Netherlands, p.9.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 50, 60-62.

⁶ This was stated to me by Asha Hans, a renowned Indian human rights activist. She had visited the refugee camps after the accord.

⁷ PCJSS is the political platform that had carried on the autonomy movement on behalf of the Hill people