

Covid-19 Outbreak and the life struggle of the indigenous people of Bangladesh

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensely affected human lives and livelihoods around the world. When the nature and its resources all around the world drastically worsening and headed to unimaginable catastrophe, the novel coronavirus pandemic represents nature taking revenge that has jumped from other living organisms into the human realm. Already we have seen how our natural environment is recovering during the worldwide shutdown in the Covid-19 outbreak.

Indigenous people are the children of nature and they are managing and protecting the natural environment. And it is recognized that indigenous populations are the best guardian of forest and biodiversity. However, the indigenous communities are also not free from the coronavirus. They have taken many initiatives to protect the community people from the impact of Covid-19.

According to the National Census of Bangladesh 2011, the number of the country's indigenous population is 1,586,141, which is 1.8 percent of the country's total population. The indigenous communities living in the plain-lands are considered one of the most oppressed minorities in Bangladesh. They have a unique feature in terms of history, tradition, socio-cultural-religious practices, etc. Indigenous peoples in the plains are located mainly in the border regions of the country in the northwest (Rajshahi-Dinajpur), central north (Mymensingh-Tangail), north-east (Greater Sylhet), south and south-east (Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Satkhira, and Greater Barisal).

Their ancestral croplands and other landed properties are being grabbed and their family and household lands are encroached upon.

As a result, they are gradually becoming landless and migrating. At the moment, the coronavirus pandemic is another life-threatening risk for indigenous peoples in these regions. In terms of hardcore poverty, which is a subset of absolute poverty, the rate for overall rural Bangladesh is 17.9 percent, whereas, for the plain land indigenous peoples, the rate is about 25 percent (Dr. Abul Barkat, 2016).

However, some IP partner organizations of ALRD have taken initiatives to raise awareness on the guidelines declared by the government to prevent Covid-19.



Partner organization **ASUS** arranged a couple of courtyards with its male and female IP groups in three villages of Natore district. They encouraged them to wash hands with soap frequently, use masks at their workplaces, and when they go out for work or shopping. They also asked them to maintain social distance out of the home.



Farmers of the indigenous communities in the Ghoraghat sub-district of Dinajpur district are working in their agricultural farms using masks and maintaining social distance. **WCDB**, a partner of ALRD, is collaborating with the local administration in raising awareness among the villagers.



The indigenous community of **Munda**, living in Satkhira district near the Sundarbans mangrove forest, depending on the resources of the forest for their subsistence livelihoods. 460 Munda families are living in eight coastal unions – the lowest tier of local government - of Shyamnagar sub-district (Upazila) in Satkhira, comprising more than 3,000 people. Since the outbreak of coronavirus, and super cyclone Amphan, the Munda people have been caught in a situation of drastically reduced work and income opportunities and are unable to fend for themselves. Moreover, many restrictions have been imposed on access to the Sundarbans, thus the workspace for the Munda people has been shrunk. They are struggling to provide food for their families. **The Sundarbans Adibasi Munda Sangstha (SAMS)** -a partner organization of ALRD has distributed food items among 177 destitute Munda families of 4 Unions of Shyamnagar with the support of several organizations and individuals.





The **Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)** is situated in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh encompassing three hill districts: Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban. It shares borders with Myanmar and India. It is one of the most diverse regions in the country. Home to eleven indigenous ethnic groups, collectively known as the **Jumma** people, these indigenous groups are distinct from the majority Bengali people of Bangladesh in respect of language, religion, culture, heritage, way of life, social history, and economy. Land dispute is a major problem for the indigenous peoples living in this region. Since shifting (jhum) cultivation is the main source of livelihood for the indigenous people, a significant number of people living in remote areas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts regularly facing food crises due to unresolved land issues.

According to Bangladesh Adibasi Forum, four millions indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts and plain lands in Bangladesh are mostly poor and suffering from crises due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. When COVID-19 patients were identified in the CHT, the indigenous peoples of the CHT have taken the following initiatives to help their communities.



The indigenous **Mro** people of the Sadar sub-district of Bandarban in the CHT followed their age-old tradition of village lockdown during any pandemic situation erecting bamboo fences around their village so that no one can enter into or exit from the village. They also put a justifying note on the fences in their indigenous language as well as the Bengali national language.



Local Headmen and Karbari, the traditional leaders of the CHT, set up quarantine centres in the areas under their jurisdiction for the incoming people from outside and suspected corona patients with the help of the villagers. At a certain distance, they set up quarantine centres on the slope of the hills. One initiator of this venture, **Pushpal Kusum Talukder** of Ghilachhari Mouza of Kauhali sub-district (Upazila) of Rangamati district, trained by ALRD is in charge of overall supervision of the quarantine center under Ghilachhari mouza.



The villagers of Mahalchhari in Khagrachhari district helped cut the paddy of a patient suffering from coronavirus. An indigenous woman was identified as a covid patient on May 13 when her whole family was being quarantined. The villagers, led by a local leader, **Sushant Lal Karbari**, helped the family of the COVID patient harvesting their paddy from the field.



'**Jumma Youth's Love for the Forest Flowers**', an initiative of the indigenous students, distributed food to the indigenous peoples living in remote areas of the CHT.



Employees of the **Sammaditith Foundation** in Matiranga & Khagrachhari are distributing food from house to house in the remote areas of CHT.

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