

Gram Bikash Kendra  
Haldibari, Parbatipur, Dinajpur

**A seminar on –  
The responsibility of the political parties to secure and  
defend the rights of the indigenous peoples of  
Northwest Bangladesh  
and sharing of the Indigenous Peoples' Empowerment  
Process (IPEP) baseline survey report**

Venue: Dinajpur Press Club  
Date: 17<sup>th</sup> March 2009  
Time: 10.30am – 1.00pm  
Organised by: Jatio Adivashi Parishad  
Supported by: Gram Bikash Kendra

## Background

The indigenous peoples of Bangladesh mainly live in the plain lands and the Chittagong hill tracts. Altogether, there are almost 45 different indigenous community groups. Among that a big portion of indigenous people are living in the Northwest region of the country, of which the major groups are Santal, Urao, Mahali, Pahari etc. As in the hill tracts, the plain land indigenous peoples are deprived of their



entitlements and rights, and lag behind the mainstream community in terms of social, political and economic development. Due to a lack of information, awareness and access to basic services, the indigenous community people are unable to catch up with the rhythm of the mainstream.

In light of this situation, Gram Bikash Kendra developed the Indigenous Peoples' Empowerment Process (IPEP), a short intervention (September 2008 – March 2009) supported by Actionaid Bangladesh, that focused on the indigenous peoples of Fulbari Upazila, Dinajpur district.

Two of the major activities of the IPEP was to conduct a baseline survey of the indigenous peoples of Fulbari Upazila, and to discuss the identified problems with leading political parties. Jatio Adivashi Parishad, an indigenous peoples' network, took on the responsibility of arranging a discussion programme at which Advocate Sultana Kamal, prominent humanitarian worker and former advisor to the Caretaker government of Bangladesh agreed to be the chief guest.

## Participants

Representatives of different political party's, civil society members, different NGO personnel, indigenous traditional leaders, indigenous women leaders, indigenous students forum members, cultural activists, journalists, advocates and human rights activists participated in the meeting .

## Programme

- Showing of the documentary film on *Cruel Landlessness Process of the Indigenous People of Dinajpur* (GBK, 2008)
- Welcome speech
- Presentation of key note paper by Professor Gonesh Soren, Chairperson DInajpur District, Adivasi Social Development Samity
- Discussion of the key note paper by Rabindranath Soren, Secrety, Jatio Adivasi Parishad, Central Committee
- Presentation of the Indigneous Peoples' Empowerment Process (IPEP) baseline survey report by Bhupesh Roy, GBK Programme Manager (Planning, Monitoring and Training)
- Speeches and open discussion from selected speakers
- Speech from Chief Guest
- Closing remarks by Chairperson

## Summary of Activities

### Showing of the documentary film *Cruel Landlessness Process of the Indigenous People of Dinajpur* (GBK, 2008)

Showing of this short documentary helped to sensitise the audience to the problems being faced by the indigenous peoples, and prepare them for the discussion to follow.

### Welcome speech by **Subash Mardy**, Secretary Jatio Adivashi Parishad, Dinajpur district:

- Noted that the indigenous peoples are facing lots of problems
- Called on government and political parties to take action to address these problems



### Presentation of key note paper by Professor **Gonesh Soren**, Chairperson DInajpur District, Adivasi Social Development Samity

- Noted that the new government pledged in its manifesto to address the problems of indigenous peoples
- Noted also that Bangladesh is a signatory to the ILO Convention 107 on the rights of indigenous peoples, but that this commitment is not being honoured at present
- Presented the 18 demands of the indigenous peoples, including the following main points:
  - To ensure constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples
  - To form separate ministry for the indigenous peoples



- To ensure representation of indigenous peoples by the reservation of parliamentary seats at the national level
- To form a separate land commission
- To recognize indigenous peoples in customary and common property rights
- To implement ILO convention 107 and 167
- To take government initiative to observe August 9<sup>th</sup>
- To provide opportunity for mother-tongue education for indigenous peoples
- To take indigenous peoples' issues under the Special Affairs division of the Prime Minister's office
- To ensure allocation of khash land to indigenous peoples
- To return land to indigenous peoples that has been wrongly removed from their ownership
- To take initiative to amend the State Acquired and Tenancy Act, 1950, article 97
- To recover the mortgaged and dispossessed lands of the indigenous peoples
- To protect the indigenous peoples from all forms of violence
- TO introduce quotas in government offices, jobs and higher education for indigenous peoples
- To establish a safety net programme for the indigenous peoples
- To ensure at least 200 days of food and job security

**Discussion of the key note paper by Rabindranath Soren, Secretary, Jatio Adivasi Parishad, Central Committee**

- Noted that this is the first time that a government has made such a clear commitment to solve the problems of the indigenous peoples
- Noted that the new government's manifesto included the following pledges to address the problems of the indigenous peoples:
- 



**18. Religious Minorities, Disadvantaged People and Underdeveloped Areas**

i. Terrorism, discriminatory treatment and human rights violations against religious and ethnic minorities and indigenous people must come to an end permanently. Security of their life, wealth and honor will be guaranteed. Their entitlement to equal opportunity in all spheres of state and social life will be ensured. Special measures will be taken to secure their original ownership on land, water bodies, and their age-old rights on forest areas. In addition, a land commission will be formed. All laws and other arrangements discriminatory to minorities, indigenous people and ethnic groups will be repealed. Special privileges will be made available in educational institutions for religious minorities and indigenous people. Such special privileges will also apply for their employment.

ii. The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tract Peace Accord will be fully implemented. More efforts will be directed toward the development of underdeveloped tribal areas, and special programmes on priority basis will be taken to secure their rights and to preserve their language, literature, culture, and unique lifestyles.

- Noted that, as a result, the expectations and hopes of the indigenous peoples are very high
- Called on the political parties, and especially the government, to assist with this work

**Presentation of the Indigenous Peoples' Empowerment Process (IPEP) baseline survey report by [Bhupesh Roy](#), GBK Programme Manager (Planning, Monitoring and Training)**

- Presented the findings of the IPEP baseline report on the indigenous peoples of Fulbari Upazila, the major points of which included:
  - o Type of indigenous community
  - o Profession
  - o Educational background
  - o Land ownership and land cases
  - o Food security issues
  - o Water and sanitation issues
  - o Savings situation
  - o Situation of women
  - o Provision of government services to indigenous peoples from Fulbari



**Brief Summary of the Speeches Given**

**[Moazzem Hossain](#), Director, GBK:**

- Called for joint initiatives to be taken by political parties, NGOs and other key actors to address the issues of indigenous peoples
- Urged political parties to give leadership on addressing the issues of indigenous peoples



**[Jesmin Ara Joshna](#), Vicechairperson (Women), Sodor Upazila, Dinajpur District**

- Noted the contributions of indigenous peoples to various historical movements in Bangladesh
- Reminded participants of their civic responsibilities to assist indigenous peoples
- Noted that the government aims to declare a Digital Bangladesh by 2021, which must include the indigenous peoples



**[Babu Chitta Ghosh](#), Chariperson, Dinajpur Press Club**

- Noted that the new government has already begun work on fulfilling its manifesto pledges, and hopes that it will also fulfill its pledge to the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh
- Further noted the contributions of indigenous peoples at various historical junctures to the development of Bangladesh



**[Comrade Clifton](#), Member of the Bangladesher Samajtantric Dol Bashod, Dinajpur district**

- Drew attention to the food insecurity and lack of land rights of indigenous peoples
- Expressed support for the 18 demands of the indigenous peoples
- Pledged support of his party to these demands



**Mukbul Hossain, Joint Convenor, Jatio Party, Dinajpur district**

- Pledged the support of his party for the 18 demands of the indigenous people

**Advocate Liaquat Ali, General Secretary, Jatio Samajtantric Dol Joshod, Dinajpur district**

- Called for the preparation of a list of those indigenous people affected by the forestry department's activities, to form the basis of a proposal to be submitted to the Forestry Minister
- Urged the formation of a Land Commission



**Advocate M. Gulam Rahman Babul, Information and Research Secretary, Bangladesh Awami League, Dinajpur district**

- Pledged that by 2021 the government will fulfill its manifesto pledges
- Called for assistance from Advocate Liaquat Ali to prepare a proposal to be submitted to the Forestry Department
- Urged cross party cooperation in addressing the problems of the indigenous peoples



**Azizul Imam Chowdhury, Acting Chairperson, Bangladesh Awami League, Dinajpur district**

- Noted that indigenous peoples were crucial to the electoral victory of the indigenous peoples
- Declared that this forum comes at a very appropriate time to urge the government to act on its manifesto pledges
- Requested the Chief Guest to support the fulfillment of indigenous peoples demands



## Speech of the Chief Guest

**Advocate Sultana Kamal, Humanitarian worker and former advisor to the Caretaker Government**

- Noted the dire situation of the 15 crore indigenous peoples of Bangladesh
- Urged that commitments to the indigenous peoples are sincerely held and acted upon
- Noted that many governments have made empty commitments to the indigenous peoples, but that this is the first time a government has made such a clear commitment to fulfill the expectations of the indigenous peoples
- Called for work towards fulfilling the demands of the indigenous peoples with conviction
- Pledged to try her best to pass a bill supporting these demands
- Called on all Bangladeshis to work for the empowerment of the indigenous peoples, regardless of their situation or position



## Closing Speech

**Laxmi Kanta Hasda**, Chairperson of the Jatio Adivashi Parishad, Dinajpur district

- Thanked all participants for attending

## Participants' Reflections

According to the general discussion after the seminar, participants felt that the seminar had been a good initiative and would influence the leading political parties and new government to take up the cause of the indigenous peoples and honour their promises to them.



## Recommendations

1. List down all those with land cases resulting from forestry department, for a meeting with the Forestry Minister
2. Organise a roundtable discussion on the way forward for addressing the indigenous peoples issues
3. Arrange discussion meeting with the land, education, law and forestry ministries
4. Increase the access of indigenous peoples to plainland indigenous peoples through the work of government and donors, as is happening in the CHT
5. Take initiative to halt the eviction of indigenous peoples from their land
6. Take initiative to address the indigenous people's land issues through a Land Commission, by treating this as a national issue
7. Take initiative to end employment and wage discrimination against indigenous peoples, but especially against women

## Conclusions

All participants pledged their support for the 18 demands of the indigenous peoples.

Advocate Sultana Kamal pledged to try her best to take action at the parliamentary level to address the demands of the indigenous peoples.