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Indigenous Languages are in Danger of Disappearance: A Study on Selected Indigenous Communities in Bangladesh

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Abstract- This paper is to explore the challenges of our indigenous communities related to their lingual and cultural rights. This explorative research utilized qualitative method including semi-structured interview and focus group discussions. The findings showed that the indigenous communities of Bangladesh are facing many challenges such as educational, socio-economic and political to practice their languages and culture. Moreover, the consequences of those challenges are related to the extinction of their languages and culture. Also, our state policies make the situation more critical. In the future, if these tendencies are going on Bangladesh will lose her multicultural and multilingual identity.

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Abstract- This paper is to explore the challenges of our indigenous communities related to their lingual and cultural rights. This explorative research utilized qualitative method including semi-structured interview and focus group discussions. The findings showed that the indigenous communities of Bangladesh are facing many challenges such as educational, socio-economic and political to practice their languages and culture. Moreover, the consequences of those challenges are related to the extinction of their languages and culture. Also, our state policies make the situation more critical. In the future, if these tendencies are going on Bangladesh will lose her multicultural and multilingual identity.

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I. Introduction

The total population of Bangladesh was 111.46 million in 1991 (population census, 1991), 124 million in 2001 (population census, 2001) and 142.3 million in 2011 (population census, 2011) with 54(Human Rights Report 2011on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh) distinct indigenous communities (according to BBS, 2007 the number is 27). Most of them have separate languages and cultures of their own. According to the population census 1991, the ethnic population of Bangladesh was 1.2 million (the exact figure was 12, 05978) which constitutes 1.13 percent of the total population of Bangladesh (Population census, 1991). However, gaps exist between the official figures and private estimates (Mohsin, 2005). According to the Monthly Statistical Bulletin of Bangladesh (March 1981), the ethnic population in the five districts in Rajshahi division was sixty-two-thousand, but various Christian missions in private censuses found the number to be double that (Maloney, 1984). Moreover, the estimation of Human Rights Report 2011 on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh shows that Bangladesh has approximately 3.00 million indigenous people who constitute 2 percent of our total population (Human Rights Report 2011on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh).

Table 1: The statistics of the indigenous people of Bangladesh at a glance

Census Year	Number of total indigenous population	percentage
1981	897,828	1
1991	12,05978	1.13
2001	1,772,788	1.28
2011	15,86,141	1.1

Source: Population census 1981, 1991, 2001 and BBS 2011

Based on their geographical inhabitants, the indigenous communities are two groups which can be shown in the table below-

Table 2: Information related to plain and hill indigenous communities

Groups of indigenous communities	Living areas	Name of the communities	Total population
The plain groups	The border regions in the northwest, north and northeast parts of Bangladesh	Koch, Garo, Manipuri, Hajong, Rakhain, etc.	1,036,060 (Population census, 2001)
The hill groups	Southeast parts of Bangladesh	Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mro, Tanchangya, Lushai, Khumi, Chak, Khyang, Bawm and Pankhua.	736,682 (Population census, 2001)

Indigenous people of the country have used 40 different languages (Ferdous, 2009) to communicate with others. However, the constitution of Bangladesh does not officially recognize its lingual diversity (Mohsin, 2005) as article 3 part 1 of it adopts Bangla as the state language. This non-recognition of multiculturalism made

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them vulnerable at the lingual and cultural level, and they have to face many challenges in practicing their languages and culture.

II. Languages in Danger of Disappearance: Bangladesh Context

In Bangladesh, indigenous people live in isolated and backward areas and those areas are lagging behind the national economic, educational, health facilities, and infrastructural development support. Extreme poverty, low educational attainment, poor housing conditions and insufficient private property are the key characteristics of indigenous households. As a result, they feel alienated from the mainstream Bengalis, and their languages and culture are undergoing the vulnerable position. For example, according to a report by Daily Prothom Alo, four indigenous languages of our country are severely endangered. They are: a). Bhojpuri b). Bangli c). Kurmi and d). Rajbangohi (Daily Prothom Alo, 20 February 2008). Moreover, another endangered language is 'Remingtacha,' and 30-40 speakers are alive in Bangladesh (Sikder, 2017). The situation of existing indigenous languages is also vulnerable (ibid).

a) The Matic Questions

a) What are the challenges of indigenous people facing to practice their language and culture?
b) How Bangla language and culture dominate the indigenous language and culture?
c) Do the challenges are responsible for the extinction of language and culture of indigenous communities?

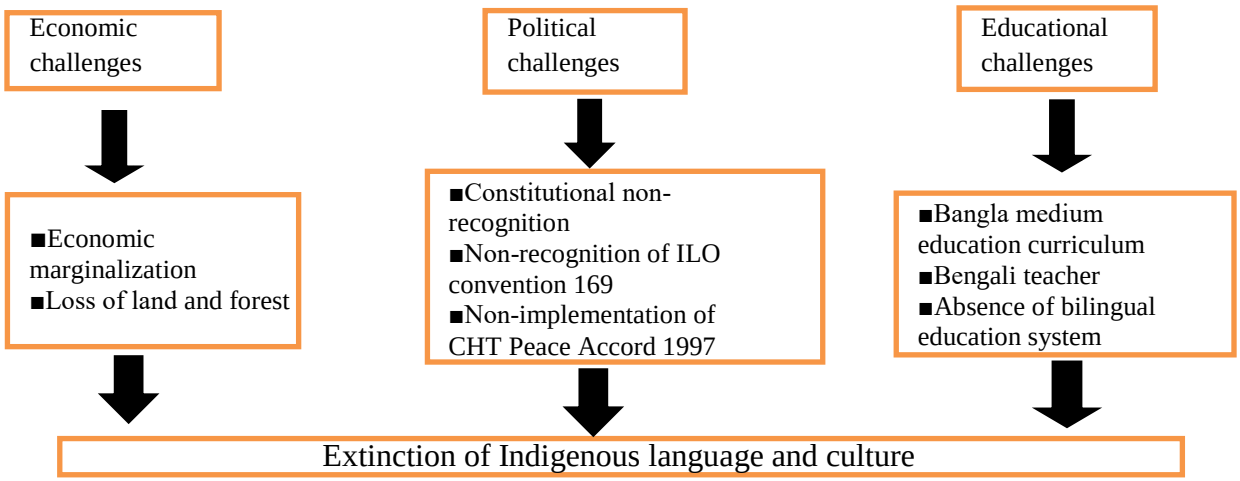
III. Methodology

It is exploratory research which has utilized Qualitative method including Semi-structured interview and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) techniques to collect data. This study investigates the challenges from different categories of respondents from four different communities named Chakma, Marma, Mrong as the hill groups from two districts of Chittagong Hill Tracts Rahgamati, Bandarban and Hajong community as plain groups from Susong Durgapur, Netrokona district. 55 respondents were interviewed from the above-mentioned communities, and five experts were also interviewed who are working with our indigenous people. The study includes the teachers, primary, college and university students, community chiefs, political activists, cultural activists from above-mentioned communities to make the data authentic.

IV. Theoretical Frame Work

The liberal perspective on the individual and the state is seen appropriate for the study because it promotes assimilationist ideas. Moreover, it encourages group superiority and objectification that legitimate oppressions and discriminations. Liberal theory is the individualist theory that gives advantages to the dominant group. The central theme of it can be expressed using the concept of "group as otherness" (Dyke, 1997). It rejects the intermediate groups which indicate that there is no existence of subsidiary groups within the state, the groups should be treated as "Others" (ibid, 1997). According to the liberal theory, the subsidiary groups have no recognition, and they have no moral rights. The liberal theory does not accept the term "Pluralism." As liberal theory provides no place for pluralism, it makes the groups such as ethnic communities as "others" and deprives the ethnic communities of their moral rights. Shortly saying, under the liberal theory the minority groups accept the "second-class status."By liberal theory, the hegemonic nature of dominant groups has emerged, and this hegemonic nature encourages the extinction of languages and culture of subsidiary groups within the state.

V. Conceptual Framework of the Study



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VI. Findings of the Study

a) *Lingual and Cultural Challenges of Indigenous People Living in Bangladesh*

i. *Economic Challenges*

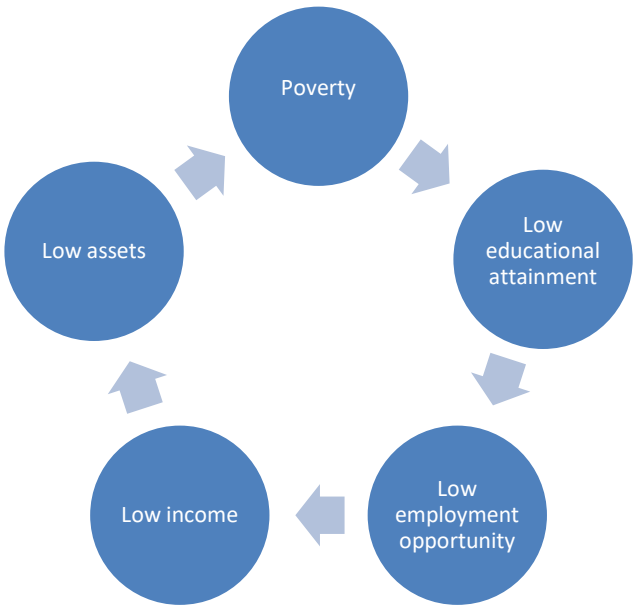
Economic marginalization: Economic marginalization is one of the challenges for indigenous people of all over the world. Estimation shows that indigenous people constitute about 5% of the world's population but comprise about 15% of the world's poor (Hossain and Zareen, 2012). In Bangladesh, they are the poorest of the poor. They are the most disadvantaged and underdeveloped groups regarding health, education and other socio-economic aspects (ibid, 2012). Six out of ten households in CHT irrespective of ethnicity live below the national absolute poverty line where each member consumes less than 2,100 calories per day; the other four live in extreme poverty and consume less than 1,800 calories per day (Human Rights Report 2011on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh). Moreover, 65 percent of the hill people and 80 percent of the plain land indigenous people live below the absolute poverty line (Human Rights Report 2011on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh).

Table 3: Budgetary allocation for indigenous people in 2010-11 fiscal years

Budgetary allocation for CHT (taka)	Budgetary allocation for plain land (take)
565 crores	12 crores
The allocation is below 0.5 percent of the total budgetary allocation	

Source: (population census, 1991)

Poverty is a vicious circle for them from which remedy is quite impossible. For example,



The poverty condition of small communities is more severe than the largest one. This economic marginalization is weakening their lingual and cultural rights. They cannot take any steps to preserve their language and culture because it requires financial supports which is quite impossible to manage for them. One of the respondents said that "most of the indigenous people work twelve hours daily to manage two meals a day; they have no leisure time to think about their lingual and cultural vulnerability and preservative measures".

Loss of land and forest: Land, forest, and life all are synonymous with indigenous people. In our country, Indigenous people lost their land and forest for different reasons. Recent research on ten plain land indigenous communities showed that they had lost 202,164 acres of land (Halim, 2009).

Table 4: Land related incidents and casualties of Indigenous Peoples in 2011

Form of atrocity	Hill groups	Plain groups	Total
No. of houses burnt to ashes	111	---	111
No. of houses looted and ransacked	06	06	12
No. of the family attacked	146	19	165
No. of the person assaulted and injured	20	01	21
No. of the person killed	02	01	03

Source: (Human Rights Report 2011on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh).

The indigenous peoples have been facing challenges with their land and forest for centuries. The main reason is to ignore 'the traditional land and forest rights' of indigenous people. As a result, the land and forests where they live are disappearing day by day and also their social and cultural identity. Without protecting their traditional land and forest rights, we will not be able to protect their language and cultural rights.

Moreover, Forest is a life surviving element for them. Most of their cultural practices related to the forest. For example, 'Jhum puja' (worshiping of shifting cultivation) is a festival for hill group indigenous people. Also, Jhum cultivation (shifting cultivation) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts has a close relation to their culture, heritage and belief systems (Sikder, 2009). However, nowadays the government is discouraging Jhum cultivation (shifting cultivation) on the ground that it is not environmental friendly (Mohsin, 2005). As a result, Jhum(shifting cultivation) based cultural practices are decreasing day by day. One of the respondents said that "we performed Jhum puja (worshiping of shifting

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cultivation) at harvest time. However, now we are observing it in a limited manner as jhum cultivation (shifting cultivation) is reduced. Our next generation will not observe it as we cannot preserve the traditional cultural practices."

ii. *Educational Challenges*

Educational challenges have many dimensions for indigenous people. For example,

a) Language related challenges
b) Curriculum related challenges
c) Challenges related to teachers

Language related challenges: In the primary and secondary level, our government schools are following Bangla as the medium of instruction. As a result, indigenous students who have their native languages feel difficulties to compete with mainstream Bengali students. One of the respondents explained the situation impressively, "Our schools made the language related challenges extreme as indigenous children find no relation between their daily language and educational language. In schools, indigenous students have to learn three new alphabets except for their one, for example, English alphabets, Bangla alphabets, and mathematics. They have to spend lots of time to learn those new subjects. As a result, they find little time to learn their alphabets which reduces the practice of their mother tongue."

Indigenous students learn Bangla from the very beginning of their school life. So,after the time being they feel if books are written in their languages, it will be tough for them. The main reason for such feelings is their reducing tendencies of the practice of their alphabets. A Marma student of Bandarban Govt. Primary School said, "I do not know Marma alphabets. If my books are in Marma language, I will not understand any subject." However, the situation is changing as Government introduced primary education for indigenous students in their mother tongue.

Curriculum related challenges: In Bangladesh, the academic curriculum of school and college levels is heavily biased towards the dominant community. Indigenous students do not find their own history, culture, role models in the national curriculum. As a result, indigenous students feel alienated from their academic life. For example, one of the respondents said "our textbooks give information about Eid (a religious festival for mainstream Muslim communities), Durghapuja (a religious festival for Hindu communities). When Bengali students read the textbooks, they feel homogenous to it. However, these terms are alienated from indigenous students as they do not have any idea about those festivals."

Also, our main books and other reference books have portrayed indigenous people in humiliating ways. For example, a compulsory book of class five tells that Garros (a plain land indigenous community) have larger than average size ear. (Human Rights Report 2011on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh). Another respondent said, "If the curriculum had the reflection of our socio-economic, religious and cultural life, our students would get familiar topics which made them interested in learning. It will also provide two benefits, such as-

i. Education curriculum will not create any inferiority feelings among indigenous students.
ii. Feelings of prejudice and discrimination against indigenous people would not grow among Bengali students.

Challenges related to teachers: Teachers who taught indigenous students are mainly Bengali which makes the problem more severe along with language and curriculum challenges. It disturbs indigenous students' learning process as it creates teachers- students interaction problem. One of the respondents said that "Bengali teachers are also a challenge for indigenous students as they cannot communicate properly with teachers, on the other hand, teachers cannot teach indigenous students according to their ways, and finally a gap exists between teacher-students relationship." Another respondent Sanjeeb Drong, general secretary of the CHT based ethnic minority rights coalition, Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum said that, "For indigenous students teachers should be recruited from their communities so that they have a similar environment in school as they have at home, without which it is impossible to increase their literacy rate". The Chief of Chakma Circle, Raja Debashish Roy also added that "ethnic teachers should be given appointment for the schools of ethnic regions and the government should have different appointment regulations to recruit those teachers."

Findings of the study showed that education-related challenges are a hindrance for indigenous students. Only a few students can overcome these challenges. As a result, the dropout rate among them is very high. A study conducted by Human Development Research Centre in 2009 have shown that students who start schooling fewer than 8 percent complete primary education while 2 percent complete secondary education (Human Rights Report 2011on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh). Moreover, according to 2001 census data, the literacy rate among the indigenous people is only 37.47 percent.

iii. *Political Challenges*

Constitutional non-recognition: The non-recognition is one of the main challenges for the indigenous people of our country. Moreover, the constitution does not recognize their lingual and cultural distinctiveness as Article 6 (2) of it stated that "The people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bengalis as a nation and the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis." A respondent expressed his feelings by the way-

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"Constitutional recognition is important for us. In the past of our history (both British and Pakistan regime), we had enjoyed the constitutional rights. However, after the birth of Bangladesh, its constitution has not recognized us yet. So, our demands are not something new. If we are recognized in the Bangladeshi constitution, the condition of our language and culture would not be so". Without the recognition, they are now the second class citizens of our country. A respondent expressed his dissatisfaction by saying "No need to talking about our language and culture. Our constitution does not recognize us. As the constitution is made by us, it is possible to recognize us along with our language and cultural identity."

Non-recognition of ILO convention 169: The government ratified ILO convention no. 107 instead of convention no. 169 which forces the concerned government to adopt measures to introduce education for indigenous people in their mother language. Also, Article 28(3) stated that "Measures shall be taken to preserve and promote the development and practice of the indigenous languages of the people's concerned."

Article 31 also added,

> "Efforts shall be made to ensure that history textbooks and other educational materials provide a fair, accurate and informative portrayal of the societies and cultures of these people's."

One of the respondents said that "if our government ratified ILO 169, preservation of our language and culture would be easier, because we could have imposed pressure on the government to take measures to protect it. No approval of ILO 169 is a great challenge to us". However, the education policy of 2010 included education of indigenous students by their mother tongue and government already introduced it for five communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh which is a positive step toward protecting indigenous languages, culture and heritage, and also their existence.

Non-implementation of CHT Peace Accord 1997: The non-implementation of Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord 1997 is another political challenge for indigenous people of CHT. Findings have shown that most of the respondents believe that the implementation of peace accord will solve their problems including the lingual and cultural one.

VII. Discussion and Conclusion

At present, indigenous people constitute 5 percent of the world's total population and represent over 5,000 distinct languages and cultures in more than 70 countries (Human Rights Report 2011on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh). Most of them have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics distinct from those of other segments of national populations. Among those countries, Bangladesh is also a proud member. Bangladesh should feel pride in her lingual and cultural diversity as we know 'diversity is the beauty'. However, the picture is not satisfactory for us. Findings of the study have shown that in every step of life indigenous people feel many challenges as our state does not recognize their traditional land, forest, lingual and cultural rights. The situation is expressed by the liberal perspective on 'individual and the state.' The liberal theorist argued that there would be no subsidiary groups within the state. For example, Rousseau argued that

> "If.....the general will is to be truly expressed, it is essential that there be no subsidiary groups within the state..... Liberal theory is the individualist theory; it provides no place for pluralism" (Dyke, 1997).

The constitutional non-recognition of indigenous people shows that our state does not provide any place for intermediate groups and does not encourage pluralism. It makes more than forty distinct indigenous communities as 'Others' and denies its heterogeneity identity.

The challenges of indigenous people further strengthen by the state's assimilationist strategies as her constitution adopts Bengali nationalism which includes only Bengali language and culture. The assimilationist strategies are related to liberal individualism as it promotes an assimilationist ideal. It condemns group based exclusions and discriminations (ibid, 1997).

In Bangladesh, the economic, educational and political challenges are making the position of indigenous people vulnerable. Being the dominant group, Bengalis are enjoying the privileged position and non-Bengalis have to abandon their culture or accept the second-class status which is also the theme of the liberal theory of individual and the state.

Moreover, all the challenges lead their language and culture towards the threat of extinction. Findings of the study have shown that loss of land, and forest play a significant role in the disappearance of their language and culture as land and forest are the center of indigenous life, language and culture. Raja Debasish Roy, Chakma Circle Chief of CHT has explained their customary rights by the following ways-

Two broad types of customary law have particular relevance to the indigenous peoples of the CHT. One of these is their custom-based family law, which is primarily administered by the "traditional" indigenous institutions of the karbari (local land area distribution system), the mauza(local land area distribution system), headmen, and the "circlechiefs" whose offices are formally recognized as being an integral part of the CHT administrative set-up.The other is the custom-based right of the indigenous peoples over the natural resources that they regard as their

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commons, irrespective of their formal legal classification (Roy, 2004).

Also, their land and forest loss increases their poverty. The whole situation makes them economically vulnerable, and it leads them unable to preserve their languages and culture.

Findings of the study have shown that our education systems are also making the lingual and cultural position of indigenous people more vulnerable. The young generations of indigenous people are interested to use oral form instead of learning their alphabets as they have to learn Bangla, English, and Mathematics in schools. As a result, young students claim 'textbooks will be hard for them if it is written in their languages.' However, communities who are small in size, and who have only the oral form of language are more prone to extinction. In this respect, the only positive sign is the government starts to provide education for young indigenous students by their own language which will play a significant role in preserving their languages and culture.

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