

# 1 Indigenous Languages are in Danger of Disappearance: A Study 2 on Selected Indigenous Communities in Bangladesh

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## 7 **Abstract**

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

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17 **Index terms**— indigenous communities, lingual and cultural rights, multicultural and multilingual identity  
18 distinct indigenous communities (according to BBS, 2007 the number is 27). Most of them have separate  
19 languages and cultures of their own. According to the population census 1991, the ethnic population of  
20 Bangladesh was 1.2 million (the exact figure was 12, 05978) which constitutes 1.13 percent of the total population  
21 of Bangladesh ??Population census, 1991). However, gaps exist between the official figures and private estimates  
22 (Mohsin, 2005). According to the Monthly Statistical Bulletin of Bangladesh ??March 1981), the ethnic  
23 population in the five districts in Rajshahi division was sixty-two-thousand, but various Christian missions  
24 in private censuses found the number to be double that (Maloney, 1984). Moreover, the estimation of Human  
25 Rights Report 2011 on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh shows that Bangladesh has approximately 3.00 million  
26 indigenous people who constitute 2 percent of our total population (Human Rights Report 2011on Indigenous  
27 Peoples in Bangladesh). (Ferdous, 2009) to communicate with others. However, the constitution of Bangladesh  
28 does not officially recognize its lingual diversity (Mohsin, 2005) as article 3 part 1 of it adopts Bangla as the state  
29 language. This non-recognition of multiculturalism made them vulnerable at the lingual and cultural level, and  
30 they have to face many challenges in practicing their languages and culture.

## 31 **1 II. Languages in Danger of Disappearance: Bangladesh Con- 32 text**

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

42 a) The Matic Questions a) What are the challenges of indigenous people facing to practice their language  
43 and culture? b) How Bangla language and culture dominate the indigenous language and culture? c) Do the  
44 challenges are responsible for the extinction of language and culture of indigenous communities? III.

## 45 2 Methodology

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

54 IV.

## 55 3 Theoretical Frame Work

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

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

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

73 Loss of land and forest: Land, forest, and life all are synonymous with indigenous people. In our country,  
74 Indigenous people lost their land and forest for different reasons. Recent research on ten plain land indigenous  
75 communities showed that they had lost 202,164 acres of land (Halim, 2009). The indigenous peoples have been  
76 facing challenges with their land and forest for centuries. The main reason is to ignore 'the traditional land and  
77 forest rights' of indigenous people. As a result, the land and forests where they live are disappearing day by day  
78 and also their social and cultural identity. Without protecting their traditional land and forest rights, we will  
79 not be able to protect their language and cultural rights.

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

## 87 4 Poverty

## 88 5 Low educational attainment

## 89 6 Low employment opportunity

## 90 7 Low income

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

94 ii. Educational Challenges Educational challenges have many dimensions for indigenous people. For example,  
95 a) Language related challenges b) Curriculum related challenges c) Challenges related to teachers Language  
96 related challenges: In the primary and secondary level, our government schools are following Bangla as the  
97 medium of instruction. As a result, indigenous students who have their native languages feel difficulties to  
98 compete with mainstream Bengali students. One of the respondents explained the situation impressively, "Our

99 schools made the language related challenges extreme as indigenous children find no relation between their daily  
100 language and educational language. In schools, indigenous students have to learn three new alphabets except for  
101 their one, for example, English alphabets, Bangla alphabets, and mathematics. They have to spend lots of time  
102 to learn those new subjects. As a result, they find little time to learn their alphabets which reduces the practice  
103 of their mother tongue.”

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

## 110 **8 Curriculum related challenges:**

111 In Bangladesh, the academic curriculum of school and college levels is heavily biased towards the dominant  
112 community. Indigenous students do not find their own history, culture, role models in the national curriculum.  
113 As a result, indigenous students feel alienated from their academic life. For example, one of the respondents said  
114 “our textbooks give information about Eid (a religious festival for mainstream Muslim communities), Durghapuja  
115 (a religious festival for Hindu communities). When Bengali students read the textbooks, they feel homogenous  
116 to it. However, these terms are alienated from indigenous students as they do not have any idea about those  
117 festivals.” Also, our main books and other reference books have portrayed indigenous people in humiliating ways.  
118 For example, a compulsory book of class five tells that Garros (a plain land indigenous community) have larger  
119 than average size ear. (Human Rights Report 2011 on Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh). Another respondent  
120 said, “If the curriculum had the reflection of our socio-economic, religious and cultural life, our students would  
121 get familiar topics which made them interested in learning. It will also provide two benefits, such as. Education  
122 curriculum will not create any inferiority feelings among indigenous students. ii. Feelings of prejudice and  
123 discrimination against indigenous people would not grow among Bengali students.

124 Challenges related to teachers: Teachers who taught indigenous students are mainly Bengali which makes the  
125 problem more severe along with language and curriculum challenges. It disturbs indigenous students’ learning  
126 process as it creates teachers-students interaction problem. One of the respondents said that “Bengali teachers  
127 are also a challenge for indigenous students as they cannot communicate properly with teachers, on the other  
128 hand, teachers cannot teach indigenous students according to their ways, and finally a gap exists between teacher-  
129 students relationship.” Another respondent Sanjeeb Drong, general secretary of the CHT based ethnic minority  
130 rights coalition, Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum said that, “For indigenous students teachers should be  
131 recruited from their communities so that they have a similar environment in school as they have at home, without  
132 which it is impossible to increase their literacy rate”. The Chief of Chakma Circle, Raja Debasish Roy also  
133 added that “ethnic teachers should be given appointment for the schools of ethnic regions and the government  
134 should have different appointment regulations to recruit those teachers.” Findings of the study showed that  
135 educationrelated challenges are a hindrance for indigenous students. Only a few students can overcome these  
136 challenges. As a result, the dropout rate among them is very high. A study conducted by Human Development  
137 Research Centre in 2009 have shown that students who start schooling fewer than 8 percent complete primary  
138 education while 2 percent complete secondary education (Human Rights Report 2011 on Indigenous Peoples in  
139 Bangladesh). Moreover, according to 2001 census data, the literacy rate among the indigenous people is only  
140 37.47 percent.

## 141 **9 iii. Political Challenges**

142 Constitutional non-recognition: The non-recognition is one of the main challenges for the indigenous people of  
143 our country. Moreover, the constitution does not recognize their lingual and cultural distinctiveness as Article  
144 6 (2) of it stated that “The people of Bangladesh shall be known as Bengalis as a nation and the citizens of  
145 Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshis.” A respondent expressed his feelings by the way- “Constitutional  
146 recognition is important for us. In the past of our history (both British and Pakistan regime), we had enjoyed  
147 the constitutional rights. However, after the birth of Bangladesh, its constitution has not recognized us yet.  
148 So, our demands are not something new. If we are recognized in the Bangladeshi constitution, the condition of  
149 our language and culture would not be so”. Without the recognition, they are now the second class citizens of  
150 our country. A respondent expressed his dissatisfaction by saying “No need to talking about our language and  
151 culture. Our constitution does not recognize us. As the constitution is made by us, it is possible to recognize us  
152 along with our language and cultural identity.”

153 Non-recognition of ILO convention 169: The government ratified ILO convention no. 107 instead of convention  
154 no. 169 which forces the concerned government to adopt measures to introduce education for indigenous people  
155 in their mother language. Also, Article 28(3) stated that “Measures shall be taken to preserve and promote  
156 the development and practice of the indigenous languages of the people’s concerned.” Article 31 also added,  
157 “Efforts shall be made to ensure that history textbooks and other educational materials provide a fair, accurate  
158 and informative portrayal of the societies and cultures of these people’s.” One of the respondents said that “if

## 11 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

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159 our government ratified ILO 169, preservation of our language and culture would be easier, because we could  
160 have imposed pressure on the government to take measures to protect it. No approval of ILO 169 is a great  
161 challenge to us". However, the education policy of 2010 included education of indigenous students by their  
162 mother tongue and government already introduced it for five communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in  
163 Bangladesh which is a positive step toward protecting indigenous languages, culture and heritage, and also their  
164 existence. Non-implementation of CHT Peace Accord 1997: The non-implementation of Chittagong Hill Tracts  
165 Peace Accord 1997 is another political challenge for indigenous people of CHT. Findings have shown that most of  
166 the respondents believe that the implementation of peace accord will solve their problems including the lingual  
167 and cultural one.

## 168 10 VII.

## 169 11 Discussion and Conclusion

170 At present, indigenous people constitute 5 percent of the world's total population and represent over 5,000  
171 distinct languages and cultures in more than 70 countries (Human Rights Report 2011on Indigenous Peoples in  
172 Bangladesh). Most of them have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics distinct from  
173 those of other segments of national populations. Among those countries, Bangladesh is also a proud member.  
174 Bangladesh should feel pride in her lingual and cultural diversity as we know 'diversity is the beauty'. However,  
175 the picture is not satisfactory for us. Findings of the study have shown that in every step of life indigenous people  
176 feel many challenges as our state does not recognize their traditional land, forest, lingual and cultural rights. The  
177 situation is expressed by the liberal perspective on 'individual and the state.' The liberal theorist argued that  
178 there would be no subsidiary groups within the state. For example, Rousseau argued that "If.....the general  
179 will is to be truly expressed, it is essential that there be no subsidiary groups within the state..... Liberal  
180 theory is the individualist theory; it provides no place for pluralism" (Dyke, 1997).

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

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

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

192 Moreover, all the challenges lead their language and culture towards the threat of extinction. Findings of the  
193 study have shown that loss of land, and forest play a significant role in the disappearance of their language and  
194 culture as land and forest are the center of indigenous life, language and culture. Raja Debasish Roy, Chakma  
195 Circle Chief of CHT has explained their customary rights by the following ways-Two broad types of customary  
196 law have particular relevance to the indigenous peoples of the CHT. One of these is their custom-based family  
197 law, which is primarily administered by the "traditional" indigenous institutions of the karbari (local land area  
198 distribution system), the mauza(local land area distribution system), headmen, and the "circlechiefs" whose offices  
199 are formally recognized as being an integral part of the CHT administrative set-up.The other is the custom-based  
200 right of the indigenous peoples over the natural resources that they regard as their commons, irrespective of their  
201 formal legal classification ??Roy, 2004). Also, their land and forest loss increases their poverty. The whole  
202 situation makes them economically vulnerable, and it leads them unable to preserve their languages and culture.

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

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## 1

Census Year	population Number of total indigenous	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-

Figure 1: Table 1 :

## 2

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, Hajong, Rakhain, etc. Garo, Manipuri, Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mro, Tanchangya, Lushai, Khumi, Chak, Khyang, Bawm and Pankhua.	1,036,060 (Population census, 2001)
The hill groups	Bangladesh	Mro, Tanchangya, Lushai, Khumi, Chak, Khyang, Bawm and Pankhua.	736,682 (Population census, 2001)

Indigenous people of the country have used 40 different languages

Figure 2: Table 2 :

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

#### VI. FINDINGS of the STUDY

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Science -

Economic challenges ?Loss of land and forest marginalization ?Economic

Conceptual Framework

political challenges education

Educational challenges

?Absence of bilingualism

cord 1997 education

nition ?Non-implementation

vention 169 ?Non-r

?Bangla medium ?C

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Extinction of Indigenous culture

*[Note: a) Lingual and Cultural Challenges of Indigenous People Living in Bangladesh i. Economic Challenges Economic marginalization:]*

Figure 3:

3

Budgetary allocation for

CHT (taka)

565 crores

The allocation is below 0.5 percent of the total budgetary allocation

Source: (population census, 1991)

Budgetary

allocation for

plain land (taka)

12 crores

Figure 4: Table 3 :

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**4**

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).

Figure 5: Table 4 :



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