

Challenges in Promoting Language Rights of Indigenous People in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

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SUMMARY

When looking at the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), we can see they are close to India. In terms of history, we shared a similar British colonial administration.

What are the challenges of implementing the language rights of indigenous people in the CHT?

We need to look at history. The CHT was annexed in the 1860s. In 1947, at independence, the rules changed. The question was, are indigenous people different from others? They played little or no role in the architecture of the State. There was an erosion of autonomy. For 20 years there was an insurgency.

Then in 1997, there was a peace accord between the chiefs and headmen and the government.

When we look at the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the situation is quite worrisome for the minority groups of the CHT. There are problems in terms of poverty and hunger, health and the status of women. Minority women have more freedom than the majority population in Bangladesh, but maybe there is less empowerment.

We have a partially autonomous system with limited authority over primary education, land, health, agriculture and so forth. But the CHT faces environmental problems including deforestation and water supply challenges.

When it comes to the children, they rank below the national literacy rate. About 40% of children are not enrolled in primary education. There is a 60% drop out rate due largely to teaching in Bengali rather than the mother tongue.

How do we stand in terms of language rights under international instruments? Bangladesh has not ratified the treaties. What the indigenous people are seeking is equal rights, not special rights. We need indigenous rights and quality primary education in the mother tongue.

What we need is constitutional provisions. We want the policy of the State, not of the government, because governments change.

If we look at the problems on the ground, we can see that governments have problems with accepting minority languages. They ask themselves, isn't this (promoting minority languages) dangerous? But just like it makes sense for the Karen in Thailand to learn about the work of the king in their mother tongue, education in the mother tongue makes sense for the minorities of the CHT.

We need to focus on capacity building and engage UN agencies that have indigenous guidelines. We need to look into how much is being done and issues such as the need for more land.

We need to look at the buzz words when considering programs – consultation, participation and consent.

Indigenous people have the right to quality primary education that is sensitive to their holistic worldviews, languages, traditional knowledge and other aspects of their cultures, which contribute to human dignity and intercultural dialogue.

When we look at the recommendations of the PEDP-II Strategy Paper, it includes the recruiting of community-based teachers, the organizing of training for teachers, the introduction of pre-primary schooling with language education, a review of the curriculum, the establishment of new primary schools, and the need for flexibility.

What we are seeking is integration but not assimilation. How do we forge alliances? The word “consent” has to be followed when government, non-government and the private sector are involved in these issues.

How do we get the communities themselves to accept the use of the mother tongue, as they may worry about losing out if their children are initially taught in the local language rather than the national language? How do we get the government to accept the mother tongue? This has to be packaged in the right way, through books and publications.

DISCUSSION

Question: What changes would you like to see to empower the indigenous people?

Answer: It is exciting going through with constitutional reform, which is very important. When you have constitutional reform there is a chance to include indigenous people in the architecture of the State. Otherwise, you are really only moving the furniture around in the room. This way you include a new room.

The United Nations is conscious of the efforts being made. On the ground in Bangladesh, we have to get recognition for the indigenous people. There has to be an acceptance of spiritual pluralism in the country and an acceptance that indigenous people adhere to a form of religion that is different from that of the majority.

Question: Can technology be of help?

Answer: We have had success in using software in the Chakma language. This is catching on with the young people.