

Survival on the Fringe

Adivasis of Bangladesh



Edited by Philip Gain

This book, compendium in nature, draws up a map of the Adivasis of Bangladesh. Along with facts, anecdotes, and essential information, different chapters and write-ups provide analyses on crucial and critical issues that relate to them. The use of images and maps reinforces the analyses.

An introduction to the Adivasis of Bangladesh briefly discusses the geographical setting, disadvantages they are faced with, and their defense strategies. Profiles of major ethnic communities, brief descriptions of the little-known ones, a comprehensive list of them with numbers and their spatial distribution form a large part of the book that provides essential empirical information.

A very important section deals with the much talked about Adivasi issues such as the land, forests, access to commons, agricultural practices, invasion of monoculture on the public forestland affecting their life, culture, language, artefacts, identity, and political life.

A number of chapters provide insightful information and form a practical guide about resources on the Adivasis, the actors involved with them in Bangladesh and around the globe, glossary, theories, and concepts.

One coherent message the book tries to communicate is that the state must recognize the Adivasis, put in place a legal framework, set mechanisms to pay special attention to them and pursue positive discrimination in favor of the extremely disadvantaged and excluded groups such as those in the tea gardens and on the extreme fringe. With this book in hand one will get some guidance and incentive to think and act differently about the Adivasi communities of Bangladesh.

The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), a non-profit Bangladeshi organization, was founded in 1993 to promote investigative reporting, engage in action-oriented research, assist people to think and speak out. Since then SEHD has been through complex times and has attended serious issues of national and community interest. It has remained vocal about the danger of controlling nature that happens in many different ways and one such is monoculture plantation of non-native species and even of native breeds.

Human miseries and the erosion of values caused by human actions and inactions have also been priorities of SEHD's attention since its foundation. The organization also believes that without real democratic values promoted, a country that has fallen behind, cannot catch up; so, SEHD has remained actively involved in efforts to democratize Bangladesh. It is in this backdrop that the organization has developed innovative ways of thinking and acting in the areas of human rights and environment in particular.

Numbers are no measure of quality and do not guarantee results; yet, SEHD takes pride in the outcome of its work—approximately 30 books, a few hundred investigative reports, five survey reports, five documentary films, a moderate yet special documentation library and images of different aspects of nature and diverse human lives in Bangladesh. More importantly, SEHD has developed minds among journalists, excluded groups, Adivasis, youths, students, and academes.

SEHD, from its foundation, has been an active participant with the communities, especially the Adivasi who are the worst, in some instances historical victims of ecocide that has happened on the forestland commons of the Adivais for centuries. SEHD also plays a key role in strengthening voices against injustice done to Adivasis. This book, "Survival on the Fringe: Adivasis of Bangladesh" is a demonstration of SEHD's commitment to the Adivasis. SEHD is deeply indebted to ICCO and Misereor for making this publication possible.

Survival on the Fringe Adivasis of Bangladesh



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The woman on the front cover is Jammi Rema, a Garo of Thanarbaid in Modhupur.
She was more than 100 years old when she was photographed in April 2006.

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The Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), a non-profit Bangladeshi organization, was founded in 1993 to promote investigative reporting, engage in action-oriented research, assist people think and speak out. *Survival on the Fringe: Adivasis of Bangladesh* is a compendium on the Adivasis or small ethnic communities of Bangladesh. The book covers a wide array of topics related to their life, culture, language, rights, access to resources, and struggles. Forty-one contributors including the SEHD staff have based their contributions on both primary research and secondary information. The book is also a reflection of SEHD's work with and commitment to the Adivasis of Bangladesh. It took more than a decade to complete this compendium. In addition to providing facts, data and analyses, it also provides practical and useful tips and is a guide on resources to understand Adivasi issues in proper contexts.

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Preface

“If there is anywhere on earth where one can find within an area of few square miles several different groups exhibiting distinctly different cultures, then it is in certain regions of the southern Chittagong Hill Tracts. Here within one and the same *mouza*, one may find four groups speaking completely different languages, building different types of houses, wearing different clothing, and following different customs and different religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Animism).” This striking fact told by Claus-Dieter Brauns and Lorenz. G. Löffler about the indigenous or Adivasi peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) indicates how distinct and diverse they are from each other although they all belong to the Mongolian races speaking Sino-Tibetan languages.

The Adivasi groups in other areas of the Bangladesh—Northwest, North-center, Northeast and the coasts—are also no less diverse culturally, linguistically, and ethnically. Despite being stricken by poverty and under pressure to adopt the lifestyle of the Bangali majority, they try to stand strong, show the riches of life, and some appear to be demonstrating the role models before the homogeneity of patriarchal and Bangali Muslim society. Think of the matrilineal Garo society where women own property, do everything, can independently choose their husbands, and are seen everywhere doing all types of hard work in the fields and houses, in the rural areas and in the cities, with an air of freedom, in sharp contrast with women in the Bangali society. While in the Bangali society the women are bound by many restrictions, the Garo women are equal to their men. They smoke tobacco and drink with their men. Another matrilineal society is the Khasis in the Northeast.

The Santal, Oraon, Hajong, Mahle, Paharia, Munda, etc. are no less distinct. Eminent writer Dominique Lappierre enlightens us with a historical fact that some of these ethnic groups of Bangladesh such as Santals and Khasis “were the first people to populate the country (Indian sub-continent) ten to 20 thousand years ago.” This provides a perfect historical and cultural premise that the small ethnic groups of Bangladesh are the souls of the soil they live on and are pathfinders in many ways to our natural history, traditions, the roots of our language, and culture. This provides a strong cause that the Bangali majority have nothing to lose if they recognize these people as “Adivasis”.

But sadly enough, the overwhelmingly Bangali majority society has pushed many of these Adivasi groups living on the fringe to the mere survival edge. It is for their craving for timber that their forests have been severely exhausted in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Modhupur, and elsewhere. It is for their greed for

land that they have lost what used to be their ancestral domains. It is they who have try to impose their identity and lifestyle on the small ethnic communities. Consequently, many have been dislocated from their land, culture, and history. Impoverished, many have been compelled to leave their way of life and to assimilate with the Bangali majority. Many have migrated to cities and other places where they struggle for mere survival.

Not that they have not tried to build political resistance against the pillage of their land and commons and to protect their history, tradition, technology, and culture. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts in particular the hill people have tried an armed struggle ending in disappointment. The struggle has not only failed to achieve what it wanted to achieve, but it has also divided the hill people. In the CHT this is best demonstrated in the fact the hill people often kill hill people without understanding the long-term consequence. The intellectual fight that some of them have been trying has also been watered down without fruition.

This book has been designed to contain facts, anecdotes, and analyses both to give a map of the Adivasis of Bangladesh living on the fringe and to understand why their way of life, culture, tradition, history, and education stand to be extremely valuable for Bangladesh. An introduction to the Adivasis of Bangladesh briefly discusses their geographical setting, the disadvantages they are faced with, and their defense strategies. Profiles of major ethnic communities, brief descriptions of the little known ones, a comprehensive list of theirs (annexed) with numbers and their spatial distribution form a large part of the book. A very important section that follows the profiles put together pieces that deal with the much talked about Adivasi issues such as land [and land grabbing], forests, access to commons, agricultural practices, invasion of monoculture on the public forest affecting their life and culture, languages, artefacts, constitutional rights, and their political life. A number of chapters of the book provide insightful information and form a practical guide about resources on the Adivasis, the actors involved with the Adivasis in Bangladesh and around the globe, glossary, theories, and concepts related to the Adivasis.

Despite all our efforts for more than a decade to see this book published, it is no way a complete one. The more we have tried to understand the smaller ethnic communities, the more we were surprised to realize how little we are able to comprehend about them. Books and reports on Adivasis that exist are numerous and voluminous, but reliable accounts about their numbers, population, and different aspects of life are inadequate. While marvelous literature exists on some of the Adivasi communities, comprehensible literature is apparently absent on most of the smaller ethnic communities.

While the users of the book will be the judges for its merits, we can mention some major deficiencies without hesitation. The foremost of the deficiencies is that this book fails to do equal justice to all Adivasi groups, especially to the smaller and merged ones. The little-known and the most disadvantaged smaller ethnic groups who remain hidden get little space in this book. The information about the numbers of the ethnic communities and their population may also raise a debate. Imagine how the government, according to which the number of the ethnic communities is 27, will react to the fact that their number in Bangladesh may be as high as 90. The self-styled Adivasi leaders put the numbers at 45. The second major deficiency is that not all the profiles demonstrate uniformity and cohesion in organizing and style. Some profiles are based on good research and therefore are well written by world class anthropologist and professional writers, but many are sketchy, done by amateur writers. We have felt deeply how important it is to engage in research to do a better job on the Adivasis of Bangladesh.

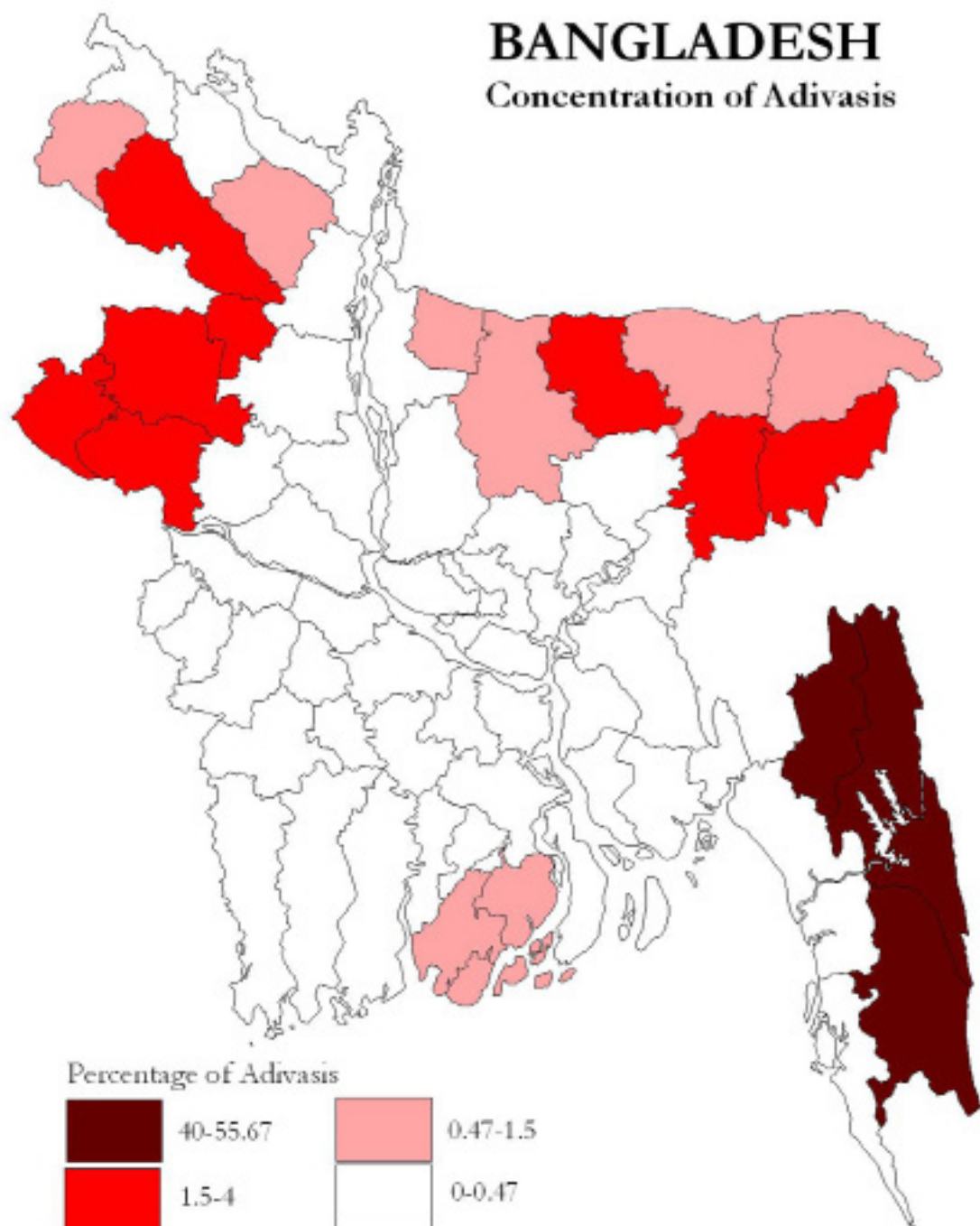
However, we will be satisfied if the facts, anecdotes, data, analyses, and the tips contained in this book become eye-openers and pointers to some directions for good research, deeper analysis and investigation into Adivasi issues. Actually, a large section of the book has been devoted to critical aspects of Adivasi life, culture, economy, rights, and their ecology. The underlying factors for the devastation of the Adivasi land have been particularly focused in this section. The Adivasis, be they in the CHT or in the plains, have the same story and that is they are getting uprooted from their land and getting pushed further to the fringe. This situation demonstrates how politically unsafe they are.

One key message we want to communicate through this book is that the state must recognize the Adivasis, put in place legal framework, and set mechanisms for their safety. Many smaller ethnic communities especially those in the tea gardens, the CHT, and living on the fragmented forest patches (such the Modhupur Sal Forest) are victims of history and geography. These communities deserve special attention of the concerned government agencies, civil society organizations, and other actors in the society for guarantee of their political protection. With this book in hand one will hopefully get some guidance and incentive to think and act differently about the Adivasi communities of Bangladesh.

Philip Gain
Editor

BANGLADESH

Concentration of Adivasis



Percentage of Adivasis has been calculated against the total population of the respective districts.

0 200 Km

Source: Population Census 1991.

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The Adivasis or small ethnic communities of Bangladesh—27 according to government and around 90 according to different sources—are distinct and diverse in culture, language, tradition, religion, and history. Eleven of these Adivasi communities live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the Southeast, a territory with hill landscapes in sharp contrast with the rest of the country. The others live in the Northwest, North-center, Northeast and the coastal fringes of Bangladesh. Two of the ethnic communities—Garo or Mandi and Khasi are matriarchal; the others are patriarchal.

The majority of the Adivasi communities are among the most disadvantaged and socially excluded groups of Bangladesh. Many are historical victims on the fringe. The overwhelmingly Bangali majority society has a responsibility for their condition today. It is for their craving for timber that their forests have been severely exhausted. It is for their greed of land that they have lost what used to be their ancestral domains. It is they who have tried to impose their lifestyle on the smaller and little-known ethnic communities. Consequently, many Adivasis have been dislocated from their land, culture, and history.

This book brings together facts, anecdotes, and analyses both to give a map of the Adivasis of Bangladesh living on the fringe and to understand why their way of life, culture, tradition, history, and education that stand to be extremely valuable for Bangladesh. It also provides a guide on how to become partners with the Adivasis in their struggle for justice.



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