

The Cultural World of the Adivasis of Bangladesh

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In the beginning, for hundreds of thousands of years, forests and mountains nurtured human life. Civilization gradually lured many humans to concrete jungles. Today, we, the civilized people have coined terms such as adim or 'primitive', adivasi or 'aboriginal', and upajati or 'tribal' to define the various peoples who continue to cling to the natural life in forests or mountains.

Such labeling, no doubt, satisfies our so called 'civilized' ego. The peoples so defined, strongly object to being referred to as 'tribals' or 'aboriginal' or 'clans'. They want to be recognized as separate 'nations' or 'peoples.' Ethnic groups of eastern Bangladesh call themselves 'hilly people' just as the Santals want to be known as 'Santal' only. Following the International Year of the Indigenous Peoples 1993, the ethnic people choose to be recognized as the! Adivasi' or 'Indigenous Peoples.' The hilly peoples of Bangladesh live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Moulavibazar, whereas the Santals are seen in the northern districts of Dinajpur, Naogaon, Thakurgaon, Panchagar, etc. The Adivasis of the northern districts are divided into different ethnic groups such as, Santals, Oraon, Mundari, Mahali, Munija, Turi, Monipuri, Garo, Coch, Pahari.

Of them Santals are the oldest and largest among the plains ethnic groups, numbering 2,02,162 (1991 Population Census). The Santals belong to the Austroasiatic language group and enjoy a rich heritage. Oppression by the Bengali village leaders are forcing Bangladeshi Santals to migrate to India in large numbers. Those who are staying back, are being lured into Christianity by the Christian missionaries. The Santals are being forced to leave the forest, seeking means of livelihood. Forest is their natural home and it is the forest which brings harmony to the Santal life. Adivasi scholar Anathbandhu Chatterjee points out that the Adivasi life is intrinsically linked with the forest. The forest in fact symbolizes the Adivasi life. Physical labor, community spirit and equality constitute the ethics around which the Adivasi life centers. These traditions are shared by Adivasi men and women alike. In the Adivasi society, emancipation of women is not required to be granted by anyone. The freedom is there as the most natural thing. The Adivasi woman is as free as the forest around her. She is a mother; at the same time she works as hard as the hard-working man. For the Adivasi, labor and truth have the same meaning.

The main weapon that the Santal Adivasi uses for hunting and self-protection, is the bow and arrow. Made of locally available materials this weapon symbolizes the creation for them. The strong, curved bamboo stem of the bow, with tapering triangular ends symbolizes the male. The elastic string attached to it is the female. A myth has it that at the beginning of creation, the string urged the stem to curve like a halfmoon so that she could join him. She told him their union would bring about creation. The male then bent down to the string and the bow was complete. The arrows shot from the bow similarly symbolize children. The female thus is given an equal place in the process of creation.

First came dance, then came songs and drums and eventually there developed a musical culture which has remained a part of the Adivasi life throughout the ages. The 'primitive' societies believe that dance has been derived from the animals. The Chenchos Adivasis of Assam believe that human beings learned dance from a pair of monkeys. Dance for them is not just a form of expression of joy, but it is essentially an offering or prayer to the creator. Ask any Monipuri in Moulavibazar and you'd hear the following myth: This earth was created by joint efforts of nine Laibung Thu or Gods and seven Lainura or Goddesses. In the beginning there was only water, deep and all enveloping. Then the Goddesses started dancing on the water. Fascinated, the nine Gods congratulated them by throwing handfuls of earth from the heaven. The earth fell into the water in the rhythm with the dance. Accumulated, this earth formed this world. Ever since, the Monipuris regard dance to be divine and pure. Learning to dance is an obligation for every Monipuri boy or girl. The Monipuri dance is recognized as a classical dance form. Rabindranath Tagore introduced this dance to the world. Dancing is a ritual that must be performed in any

religious or social ceremony of the Vaishnava Monipuri. The Monipuri dance reached its height in the 18th century, during the reign of King Chingang Khonuba. The king himself was a skilled dancer and introduced a few new dances such as Basantarush, Kuncharush, Bhaddi Pareng etc. The Monipuri dance has found different expressions. One learning this dance has to master at least 40 basic steppings / rhythms. There are more than fifty forms in the Monipuri dance. In the Mukhabodi dance, the dancer tries to express a woman's responses to Krishna flute. The Monipuri today is taught in special dance schools or temples. The costumes for the dances are an art form on their own. For the Laihara Uba dance, they wear Fanek which is a dress depicting ancient designs of lotus and bees. The male dancers dress as the male characters of Mahabharata. The Monipuris are very fond of all six forms of Rush dance. This is performed at night. Along with it, in daytime they perform the Rakhali Nritya or 'shepherd' dance. The story goes that when Arjuna was staying in Monipur, his companion Krishna would play on the flute at night and Radha would come out of her house to join him in dance. Every year, the Monipuris of Bangladesh would celebrate that night in dancing and singing. The dancer's hair is tied in a top knot which is covered with a golden and silver threaded (zari) head gear. The face is covered with a white veil. The blouse is of deep green with a deep green long skirt decorated with glitters and glasses. The border of the skirt is held with a wide stiff rim. This dress is called Kumin. Silver and golden sashes stream over the shoulders. Then there are the glittering ornaments. Ancient folk songs accompany the dances.

The hill people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts also have a rich musical culture. There too, dances are essential religious and social rituals. In fact, ancient peoples all over the world hold the same significance for dance. As Hav lock Ellis wrote in his book 'The Dance of Life': "What do you dance? When a man belonging to one branch of the great Bantu division of mankind met a member of another, said livingstone, that was the question he asked. What a man danced, that was his tribe, his Social Customs, his religion, for as an anthropologist has put it, a Savage does not preach his religion, he dances it." Though strongly object to the term 'savage' one cannot but agree with the observation.

The Chakma is the largest hill tribes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Their main dance is the Jum dance. Though their dances mainly center around the Mahamuni Fair, there are dances for all agricultural activities. The Buddhist religious ceremonies are also celebrated through dancing. The Chakmas have rich tradition of ballads and songs. Among these are: Radhamon Dhonupadi ballad, ChadigangChhara ballad, Banabera ballad, Fulpara ballad, Lakshmi para ballad, Chandbir Baramash, Kipabir Baromash,

Meabir Baromash and Tanyabir Baromash. The Chakma language once had its own script called Ojhapata in which Chakma religious books such as Aghortara, lodishastra, Bhedatwa, Tahnik Shastra, and others were written. During the British rule, the Bible was also published in Ojhapata script. Nowadays Chakma is written in Bangla script. The Chakma script is still being used by the village Ojha or shamans. The Chakma literature has a long tradition and is rich with myths, folklores, rhymes, riddles and proverbs. The Rangamati Tribal Cultural Center has published a collection Chakma Rupkahini by Bankimkrishna Dewan which gives us a glimpse of the Chakma folk literature. Gojen Lama written by Shadhak Shivacharan is a unique specimen of Chakma literature of the middle ages. The book is a tribute to the Creator. The modern era in Chakma literature began with poems of Chunilal Dewan, poet and painter, who was also the first Chakma lyricist. The Marma people also have a tradition of dancing. The Marma women perform a dance drama/musical show called Pankho which depicts the life of Buddha and other mythological tales. Their singing is accompanied by traditional instruments such as Peha, Bung, Petla, Dugma and also western instruments like violin, clarinet, guitar and mandolin. They have folk songs as well as modern songs. The Tipra jum dance is linked with religious and agricultural rituals. Singing and dancing hold a special significance during the jum (slash-and-burn) cultivation particularly at the time of sowing. This dance is called Maikai which means the dance of sowing paddy. The harvesting is marked by a big festival of dancing and singing, called Mamita. The Tipras have their new year's festival which lasts for the last week of the old year. The dance which is offered to Shiva or the God Goraya as a gesture of welcoming the New Year, is called

the Garaya or herbai dance. The dancers go from house to house and perform this dance during the days of the festival. The dance is enacted through mimes. The new year's days are very sacred not only to the Tipras, but also to Chakmas, Marmas and Rakhains. The Deidak clan of the Tipra ethnic group has a death ritual of singing and dancing before the dead person. The song tells of lost hopes.

The matriarchal Garo people also known as Mandi (human person) too perform many dances as religious rituals. There are separate dances for occasions like wedding, harvesting, sowing, funeral and many others. The Mandi have a rich tradition of folk songs too. The folk songs of all the different hill people are emotionally rich and aesthetically excellent. Unlike the classic Monipuri dance, the Chittagong Hill Tracts' dances are marked by magic and frequent body movements.

Faced with poverty, want, hunger and oppression, the age old religious and democratic solidarity of the Santal society is gradually breaking up. The brave people who once established villages, clearing out forests, are helpless today. Their songs tell of the lost hopes. Tome Bimal Hasda of Birganj symbolizes the Santal today. Why did Bimal leave his village? "Because of poverty. The little land that we had was usurped by the moneylender." Santal folk songs tell of this oppression:

"We prepare lands
By clearing out forests,
The moneylender
Snatches away that land,
The santal is 'murkha' (ignorant, illiterate),
So lands are lost."

Many Santals today are being driven away to cities in search of livelihood. Hard-working, honest, illiterate and poor, the Santals sell their labor in exchange for sustenance. In the land which originally belonged to them, they live unwanted, uncared for. But the Santals are fully conscious of their heritage. Goaded into it they can burst out in revolt, as they did in 1855 during the British rule. Thirty thousand Santals joined in that revolt and the British law could hardly curb them. The Santals fought with bows and arrows while the government forces used firearms. Ten thousand Santals were killed but in the end the British had to abolish slavery of the Santals and to establish a separate administrative area for them - the Santal Pargana. The Santals of Bangladesh consider themselves to be Bengalis. As they wrote in an issue of the Santal language periodical 'Hariar Sakam' or 'Sabujpatra' in 1375 (Bangla): "The Santali is the oldest language of the Bengal. Thousands of years ago when the Aryans had not come to this land, our ancestors made this land livable. It thrills us to think that thousands of years ago when the full moon rose, they were our ancestors who leaving their huts gathered at the bank of a river or on the outskirts of a forest in this Bangladesh, singing, dancing, wearing flowered wreaths! The language they sang was Santali.

We are proud to think of that language and we are not proud to be Santalis but to be Bengalis." The word Banga, which is the original root word for Bangladesh, Bengal or Bangladesh is derived from the Santali language. In Santali 'Bangah' meant Lord Protector, the Supreme God. So Bangladeshis their God granted shekter. Some scholars, however, say Bangla came from Santali Bang plus La - which means a huge plainland.

Like the hill people, the Santals too regard dancing as divine. They believe, human beings learned to dance from four gods: Marang Buru, Johar Era, Mareko and Gosain. They too have separate dances for separate occasions. Through dance they pray for rain, through dance they celebrate the spring season, through dance they usher in the harvesting. The Santal Jhumur dance has found a place among the Bangalis too. It is called Jhumur because the dancers have strings of bells (Ghungur) tied to their ankles. This perhaps is the only Santal dance which is performed purely for entertainment.

There are six forms of Jhumur dance; of them the most entertaining is the Bhaduria which is danced in praise of the monsoon. This dance is included in Hindu-Muslim folk culture of some areas.

The Santals are gradually becoming conscious of their own language. They are realizing that not only for literature, they need this language to express their social and political demands. Consider this song originally written in Santali: "Do not take up other peoples' tongue. Speak your mother's tongue because that is the sweetest and the tongue of your father is like crystal clear water." The people who are so conscious of their own language, have the potential to protest against all sorts of oppression. We must not forget the call given out by the Santals in 1855:

"Listen, oh, listen, you
People of Dhanjur,
The drum beats
The tomtom beats,
Sido Kanhu, Chand Bhairo
Revolt revolt
Revolt revolt
Let us go quickly let us go quickly
Let us go quickly let us go quickly
Let us go quickly let us go quickly."

Before I conclude, I would like to put forward a question to the government: what the government is doing to preserve the culture of the hilly and Adivasi peoples? It remains a fact that their very existence is at stake today. The farmers are facing a glum future. The restriction on jum cultivation, the failure of different development projects and commercialization of forest land are baffling the Adivasi and hilly farmers. Their picturesque huts have become mere shacks today. (In Bandarban, the huge building for the local council and other administrative structures mock the poverty stricken huts of the hilly peoples). The denuded forests, the ripped apart nature stand witness to the destruction of these peoples. If all government efforts to safeguard the culture of the hill people are like the Tribal Cultural Institute of Bandarban, we have reasons to be skeptical.

This institute has achieved nothing but some colored photographs of some festivals of the hill people. The dances and songs that the institute simulates do not reflect the true traditions of the adivasi peoples. Even the costumes are distorted. Our request to the government: Please do not devastate the culture of these peoples in the name of reserving it. The government activities must take account of the real culture of these peoples.

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