



## SEMINAR Proceedings

# Promoting Cultural Diversity of Small Ethnic Groups in Bangladesh

BISS Auditorium, Dhaka  
Monday, 17 April 2017

Organised by



**Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)**



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# Introduction

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) organised a seminar, titled “Promoting Cultural Diversity of Small Ethnic Groups in Bangladesh”. The Seminar was held at BISS auditorium on 17 April 2017. Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister on International Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh graced the occasion as the Chief Guest. Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc, Director General, BISS commenced the Seminar with his welcome address. Mr. Naba Bikram Kishore Tripura, ndc, Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, Chaired the session. Dr. Syed Anwar Husain, Supernumerary Professor, Department of History, University of Dhaka, delivered the keynote speech. Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc, Director General, BISS, Major General (Retd.) Anup Kumar Chakma, ndc, psc former Bangladesh Ambassador to Myanmar and Professor Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Executive Director, Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB) were the panel discussants at the Seminar. Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad, Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS delivered the Vote of Thanks.



# Welcome Address



**Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc**

*Director General, BISS*

Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc, Director General of BISS in his welcome address stated that Bangladesh is a country of cultural and ethnic diversity, with over 45 small ethnic groups who possess diverse cultures that include their own languages/dialogues, food habits, dresses, music, etc. Referring to the 2011 Census, he informed the audience that Bangladesh's ethnic population is approximately 1.58 million, which represents 1.8 per cent of the country's total population. However, ethnic groups claim that their population is far more than that. Among the total small ethnic groups population, a significant number lives in the plain lands and the rest of them reside in the hilly areas. Ethnic communities in Bangladesh consist of Chakma, Santal, Marma, Moorangs, Khasi, Garos, Tripuri, Manipuri, Bawm, Khumi, Lushai and other small ethnic groups.

General Rahman opined that the presence of these diverse ethnic groups and their colourful lifestyles have significantly enriched the entire culture of Bangladesh. Each group in the society has unique strengths and perspectives that the larger community can benefit from. The rich and varied culture due to the presence of these ethnic communities is providing extra vigour to the national fabric of Bangladesh. According to him, bringing the communities into the centre of mainstream activities would immensely help Bangladesh's growth and development initiatives. Furthermore, understanding diverse cultures would also help Bangladesh to overcome and prevent racial and ethnic divisions and increase society's sense of tolerance and bondage.

General Rahman mentioned that Bangladesh has been working on protection and promotion of cultural diversity for a long time through different policies and programmes. The Constitution of Bangladesh has a clear direction for safeguarding the rights of practice and development of all cultural trends of all the people in its territory regardless of caste, religion, origin, colour, gender, etc. A cultural policy in this regard was also approved by the government in 2006. Later, in 2007, the country also ratified the UNESCO Convention 2005 on the 'Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions'. Besides, the promotion and protection of the cultural diversity of ethnic communities have also been ensured through various government policies like Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Organisation Act 2010, National Education

Policy 2010, National Children Policy 2011, National Women Policy 2011, etc. Decision has already been taken for publishing textbooks for the five ethnic languages at the primary level. The establishment of "Parbatya Chattagram Complex" (Chittagong Hill Tracts Complex) for promoting the cultural diversity, social customs and individual characteristics of the ethnic communities is currently in progress. This complex will represent the cultural heritages, social customs, languages, religions and the individual characteristics of the ethnic communities of CHT area. For ethnic groups located in other areas, the Bangladesh government is also taking different initiatives.

General Rahman expressed his high expectation that the deliberations of the seminar would help people immensely to increase their knowledge and understanding on the subject matter and would generate new ideas for promoting cultural diversity of small ethnic groups in Bangladesh.



# Keynote Presentation



**Dr. Syed Anwar Husain**

*Supernumerary Professor, Department of History, University of Dhaka*

Professor Dr. Syed Anwar Husain stated that Bangladesh is a mini melting pot. The country becomes so, as it is inhabited by people of diverse racial origin. The major demographic constituent – the Bangali people – comprises 98.02 per cent and the rest consists of ethnic minorities numbering about 40 plus. The Bengali people themselves are a mixed race with a mixed syncretic culture, while each ethnic community has specific racial origins with specific cultural heritage and attributes. As both groups of people inhabit a common land the resultant cultural landscape of the country emerges to be a mixed one. Considered in such a context, Bangladesh may be called a cultural mosaic. It would thus be erroneous to call Bangladesh unilingual and unicultural. Therefore, the policy imperative in the cultural milieu is to seek 'unity in diversity'.

In discussing the definitional elaboration of ethnicity and culture, Dr. Husain quoted from Neil Nevitte and Charles Kennedy - "ethnic community is commonly defined as a collectivity within a larger society that claims common ancestry, a shared past and shared cultural identification". For anthropologists and behavioural scientists, culture is the full range of learned human behavioural patterns. The term was first used in this way by the pioneer English Anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his pathbreaking book 'Primitive Culture', published in 1871. He quoted from Tylor - "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Culture is not limited to man only, woman also possesses and creates it as well. Since Tylor's time, the concept of culture has become the central focus of anthropology.

The definition of ethnicity refers to a community as a smaller one within the larger one and implicit in such a definition is the majoritarian and minoritarian perspectives. Such a definition, although anthropologically correct, in reality, very often results in majoritarian arrogance, which manifests in an assimilationist not an integrationist policy imperative of the larger community.

He observed that such a policy would result in minoritarian dissonance with manifold counterproductive ramifications impacting negatively on national integration. One escapes from such definitional fallout is to consider inhabitants of a certain country as equal citizens and among these citizens there may be groups



with distinctive racial background and cultural attributes. This is natural in the case of a country with a mixed population like Bangladesh. The existing definition of ethnicity is intrinsically quantitative, but the suggested alternative is a qualitative one. Professor Husain stated that the definition of culture is a generalised and qualitative one in which no distinction is made between a larger and smaller community. Culture is not constructed on the number of people belonging to it, rather on their way of life and their entire gamut of experience. In the cultural context, the Bangali and the ethnic communities stand at par although they divide as the former being at the centre and the latter in the periphery. Besides the administrative context in this divide, there is a geographical one as the ethnic communities inhabit the limitrophic regions of the country.



Professor Husain noted that historically there have been many instances of cultural give and take between these two communities. Although peripheral in nature, the ethnic languages have had an impact on the Bangla vocabulary. Clarence Maloney makes a detailed study of this intercultural phenomenon. On the other hand, most of the ethnic communities speak Bangla as the second language and many Bangla words find their way into their vocabulary. Moreover, over the years the educated ones of the ethnic communities have earned writing proficiency in Bangla language. This give and take has been a long historical process catalysed by the undeniable fact of these two communities having lived side by side over the centuries. Thus, there has been something like a cultural cross-fertilisation between the two sides.

Professor Husain opined that as the process of cultural cross-fertilisation goes on, a note of caution may be sounded against any forced imposition by the larger central community upon the smaller peripheral communities. Forced imposition takes place mostly in the case of development and perceived modernisation of ethnic communities when the development and modernisation are conceived in the larger interest of the country as a whole. An example in support of such a contention may be derived from the experience of what happened in the Chittagong Hill Tracts after the completion of the Karnaphuli Multipurpose Project in the



early 1960s. In 1964, the then Pakistan government appointed an eleven member committee funded by foreign aid-giving agencies to report on the impact of the Kaptai dam and resource potential of the region. This committee did not have any ethnic representation. This committee reported the root cause of the ethnic unrest was the slash and burn (*jhum*) cultivation that should be replaced by wet cultivation. It bluntly recommended, the people displaced by the inundation owing to the Kaptai dam should leave cultivation and become wage earners in industries or in horticulture farms that would come in the wake of 'development'. The ethnic people of the region had to go through untold sufferings for the sake of the so called development project of producing only 80 megawatts hydroelectricity for the then East Pakistan. This kind of approach to development without giving any space to the possible impact, positive or negative on the affected people was



followed throughout the Third World from the 1950s through the 1970s. However, as the 1980s rolled on development pundits began to cry hoarse that development was missed. They diagnosed that development was set at naught as there was no culture and development interface. The diagnosis was right, but the prescription has since not been applied meticulously throughout the Third World. In 1971, the eminent American Anthropologist Ted Robert Gurr came up with a paradigm of violation of cultural cores and cultural peripherals as being the cause of the rebellion of the violated people. The cultural cores are those elements of a group of people, which if violated by any intrusion make the existence of the group at stake. While the cultural peripherals are those elements which, if violated, livelihood is affected. The ethnic dissonance that Bangladesh experienced upto the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord signed on 02 December 1997 may be explained by this paradigm. The ineluctable lesson to be drawn from such an experience is that the majoritarian needs for development in the ethnic regions are to be synchronised with ethnic cultural ethos.

Professor Husain suggested that promoting autonomous development of ethnic culture is in the mutual interest of centre and periphery. This is a strategy to seek unity in diversity which promotes in the end what is called national integration. Facets of Bangali culture supplemented by the variety of ethnic cultures make Bangladesh a cultural landscape full of variety and enchanting beauty. Something tangible has so far been done by the government of Bangladesh to promote and preserve ethnic culture. The ethnic culture is

institutionally promoted by the two institutes at Cox's Bazar and Birisiri. Above all, the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs functions to oversee ethnic affairs.

### At the end, Professor Husain proposed some recommendations. These are:

- He appreciated the government's effort of printing primary school textbooks in five ethnic languages. But the distribution network needs to be widened to include all the ethnic communities seeking education and upliftment.
- Besides promoting ethnic culture locally, as is done in the case of *Baisabi* celebrations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the government may use, print and electronic media to give space to ethnic culture regularly. If done properly, such a step would give the ethnic communities a sense of belongingness to the state.
- Universities, both public and private may be instructed to host ethno-cultural events to ensure participation of ethnic students.
- Shilpakala Academy, both central and district ones, may organise ethno-cultural events at regular intervals.
- The Bangla Academy may occasionally organise seminars and workshops on ethnic languages with the participation of relevant ethnic experts. The folklore department of the Bangla Academy may do well by collecting and preserving ethnic folklores in its responsibility. The Bangla Academy publications may include sponsored titles on ethnic language and literature. Adequate space needs to be given to ethnic artists in the cultural events during the *Ekushey* celebrations.
- While sending cultural delegations abroad, the government may include a sizeable number of ethnic members.
- The International Mother Language Institute would do well to collect and preserve specimens of ethnic languages and dialects. Some of the ethnic communities have lost their dialects through prolonged non-use. The Institute may mount intensive field-level research to retrieve these dialects as far as possible.
- The Cultural Affairs Ministry and the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs should coordinate their efforts to promote ethnic culture.
- The government should have an ethnocultural policy framework to be crafted by a committee comprising relevant academics, cultural personalities and relevant ethnic personalities. Encouraging self-development of ethnic culture and promoting it through national sponsorship is a policy imperative that may be advised.

# Panel Discussion



**Professor Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta**

*Executive Director, Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB)*

Professor Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Executive Director, Research Initiatives, Bangladesh thanked Professor Dr. Syed Anwar Husain for his elaborate discussion on cultural diversity, especially in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Professor Guhathakurta, diversity, both cultural and ecological, is very important for human survival. Referring to the documentaries prepared by the Research Initiatives, Bangladesh on two small ethnic communities known as Khumi and Kiang, she emphasised on the preservation of the small ethnic communities' heritage and culture.

Professor Guhathakurta informed that the total number of population in Khumi and Kiang communities were four thousand and two thousand respectively at the time of making the documentary. In spite of their small number, both the communities have glorious history which can enrich the culture of Bangladesh.

To underscore the importance of mother tongue, Professor Guhathakurta stated that through mother tongue people can learn their own culture. It is crucial to concentrate on the smaller ethnic groups who are loosing their scripts. The organisation known as the Committee on Endangered Languages could be handy in this regard. The people of Bangladesh should not only feel proud of the Bengali language, but also should be proud of other languages and work for their conservation. She suggested evaluation and preservation of oral history of ethnic communities in this regard. She also highlighted the responsibility of the small ethnic communities to learn and nurture their own heritage. Besides, ethnic communities live in a very complex environment. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the country to enable space for them, where they can practice and cultivate their language and culture. Professor Guhathakurta also accentuated the role of ethnic communities in preserving biodiversity.

Regarding *Jhum* cultivation of ethnic communities, Professor Guhathakurta noted that *Jhum* is important because of its economic aspect and ethnic people's expertise. In addition, it is also part of their culture. If *Jhum* cultivation is discontinued, this might impact on the cultural diversity of ethnic communities. So there should be spaces where *Jhum* can be practiced. At the same time people of ethnic community should be enabled to do some self-management orientation of their culture. It is difficult for ethnic communities to

shift their cultivation method as they are not accustomed with other methods. But they have some alternative, for instance, nursery business where they can take some saplings; can have small nurseries of indigenous trees; raise them as saplings and sell them in the local market. In that way ethnic people can nurture the concept of self-management where no one can impose anything upon them and where they are not treated as mere labourers or workers for others.



Professor Guhathakurta suggested that the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs should explore the elements of self-management of ethnic communities and ask those people how they would like to manage it and in what ways they want to enjoy the benefits of such economic activities and contribute to the country's economy. She also highlighted the cultural institutions of ethnic communities which are run by Bengali teachers. She opined that local people should run those institutions. Here self-management is the key issue which is imperative to retain and sustain diversity. The people themselves should have a watch on what is real culture. A compilation of oral history from veterans of ethnic community is one effective way to preserve heritage and culture. However, Professor Guhathakurta noted that many heritages cannot be retained because they are not relevant in the present context. But those heritages should also be preserved to showcase the rich culture of ethnic communities.

Professor Guhathakurta concluded her speech by emphasising on climate change and biodiversity. She noted that climate change will result in loss of species and biodiversity. And one of the spiritual guardians of the nature is small ethnic groups. They worship nature; they believe in animism. And in the contemporary world, animism has become the greatest defenders of nature and biodiversity. So small ethnic groups should be encouraged and their knowledge in this regard should be mainstreamed. She opined that mainstreaming of knowledge is equally important with mainstreaming of people. She also stressed upon the importance of having regional and ethnic language institutes along with the foreign languages institute in the universities of Bangladesh.



## Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc

*Director General, BISS*

At the outset, **Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc**, Director General, BISS highlighted the conceptual understanding of ethnic diversity. He noted that, since the formation of the idea of “nation state”, addressing and accommodating the diversity of ethnic identity have been remaining a stiff challenge for all nations. Human civilisations experienced many devastating conflicts when nation states failed to accommodate diverging ethnic identities in their process of augmenting national integration. When states attempted to impose mono-ethnic identity, it ultimately led them towards division and conflict. As a result, the prosperity of many nations was stagnated. The emergence of democratic governance has taught nation states that if the political leadership becomes visionary, a nation can easily accommodate multi-ethnic identity by protecting and promoting ethnic communities. It fortifies national integration. In the modern world, a common dictum is “unity through diversity”. The cultural diversity enriches a nation state. There are ample of evidences that suggest, nations who acknowledged and embraced diversity in identity effectively sustained their progress and development. The democratic principles emphasise that within a national identity there may be a number of ethnic identities. The promotion of diversified ethnic identity enriches a society and strengthens state cohesion to face the challenges towards national development.

General Rahman made a departure in his discussion from the hard issues, such as the legal and institutional frameworks, conventions and constitutional obligations to the soft issues and shared two events from his personal experiences that he encountered during his service career in the CHT region. At that time, he was engaged with the humanitarian works such as supplying medicines, food or education supports for the ethnic communities living in the CHT. Despite the humanitarian work, he felt an antagonism coming from the ethnic communities towards him. He felt himself as a stranger in his own land. During that period, he was a Major of Bangladesh Army and he was assigned to build a helipad in a remote place in Bandarban. He received rations for two days while it took his troops a lot more than usual time to reach their destination. After starting the construction of the helipad, it was clear that the job will take 4 to 5 days. Hence, 3<sup>rd</sup> day onward he and his troops were out of food and supplies. As a result, they were working in empty stomach and their energy level was going down. On the following day, when they were working in the morning; General Rahman saw to his utter surprise, villagers from Monthoiching-Karbaripara and Sangliang Bom Para climbing up the hill and coming towards his post. He thought that the villagers were coming in protest to the construction of the helipad as this might have created problems for their *Jhum* harvest. However, after a heartfelt conversation with the Chief of the villages, General Rahman realised that the villagers came with food supply as they understood the troops were hungry and they offered their help to build the helipad as well. With the assistance from this small ethnic community, the Army completed the construction of the helipad. General Rahman stated that this small event made him realise the value of the soft power, as the villagers touched his heart and brushed off the feeling of being a stranger in his own land.





The second event also took place in the CHT, when General Rahman was a regional commander under the command of Major General (Retd.) Muhammad Abdul Matin, ndu, psc, who also happened to be the former Director General of BIIS. Once General Rahman came across a news that a 14 year old boy from a small ethnic group, got injured in his stomach and got admitted in a local missionary hospital. However, his surgery was not possible in that hospital due to lack of proper instruments. Upon hearing the news, General Rahman went to see this boy; fatherly feelings engulfed him as his own son is around the same age like this poor boy. Instantly, he decided to send the boy to the Chittagong Combined Military Hospital (CMH). However, the only way to evacuate the boy to the Chittagong CMH was by air and Military normally does not allow such kind of patients to be evacuated by their helicopters. However, General Rahman managed to contact his General Officer Commanding (GOC) of 24<sup>th</sup> infantry division, General Matin and by virtue of his kindness the boy was taken to the Chittagong CMH, where the boy received proper treatment. In the meantime, General Rahman arranged for the accommodation and food for the father of the boy. After two and half months, when the boy recovered, his parents came with the boy along with local people to meet General Rahman. They expressed their gratitude and said, “from today he is no more my son, he is your son.” From that day on, General Rahman adopted him as he raised this boy as one of his own. He shared these two stories from his life to prove the point that there is a necessity of incorporating soft power with hard power such as constitutional obligation. The hard power will give the government the legal bindings, legal obligations. However, General Rahman mentioned that it is important for the citizens to realise and feel from their heart that these small ethnic communities are part of the whole.



## **Major General (Retd.) Anup Kumar Chakma, ndc, psc**

*Former Bangladesh Ambassador to Myanmar*

Major General (Retd.) Anup Kumar Chakma, ndc, psc, former Bangladesh Ambassador to Myanmar, stated that the topic itself sends out the message of government and the people and the message is about the recognition of the very existence of ethnic groups in the country. Their cultural diversity and the need to promote this very diversity are important for the benefit of not only the ethnic people, but also for the country's overall social fabric and its image outside. He stated that Professor Dr. Syed Anwar Husain spoke very well and in detail to create the platform for the discussion to take place. The audience has also heard the other two panelists adding to what Professor Husain has already said. All of them have spoken based on what they heard, experienced, saw and read. Although Professor Husain defined the important terms to open up discussions, however, General Chakma wanted to define those terms in a simpler way. He noted that culture is nothing but the values, beliefs, behaviours, norms, types of communication and pattern of thinking developed by a group of people that are passed on to the next generations in order to ensure the group survival. These are nothing but the most unique characteristics of the behaviour of a group of people. It includes thoughts, feelings, speeches and actions, which make the total structure of the group, which is culture. General Chakma stated that mainstream culture is the prevailing social, political, economic norms, values, beliefs for a particular environment often referred to as dominant/majority culture. He mentioned that a group of people of sub-culture share cultural characteristics which are unique and can be differentiated from the mainstream culture or 'the others' within the society. A culture within a culture. There is always a sub-culture. By referring to an ethnic group, he meant a group of people who originates from the same geographical location and share similar ways of thinking, feelings. These characteristics may get reinforced, when groups remain together for over many generations.

General Chakma highlighted that by having discussion on cultural diversity of the ethnic groups means that Bangladesh do recognise the existence of these ethnic groups in the country. He mentioned that the word diversity refers to all sorts of differences like racial, religious, etc. It also ranges from differences that can be concealed such as a particular lifestyle to differences that cannot be concealed like colour or race. He said, "If I stand amongst you, you can easily distinguish or identify me which group I belong to". General Chakma stated that he would like to see the seminar contributing in improving the understanding of the value of cultural diversity and why and how to promote it. He hoped that the seminar will help to understand the areas like importance of inter-relation between the majority and minority ethnic groups and the ways to demonstrate amity amongst them. Next area which can be discussed is the strategies for the formulation, implementation and the barriers to the promotion of cultural diversity.

# Open Discussion

**Major General (Retd.) Muhammad Abdul Matin, ndu, psc,** former Director General of BISS shared his personal experience while he was the District Marshal Law Administrator in Mymensingh area during 1983-84, and the GOC of Rangpur and Chittagong in 2000-01 and 2001-03 respectively. He called small ethnic communities as ornaments of the society and stressed on giving value to their existence. He emphasised on identifying the problems of ethnic communities as well as devising the solutions of those problems. He opined that ethnic communities should be provided with the opportunity to flourish and should not have the feelings that they are left out from the mainstream population. He praised the government for taking prudent decisions and BISS for organising the seminar.



**Mr. Humayun Kabir Bhuiyan,** Special Correspondent, The Daily Independent raised a question regarding the languages of ethnic communities. According to him, there are many languages in the CHT area which are about to become extinct. No one understands the value of language more than the people of Bangladesh. He wanted to know whether the government is doing enough to protect the languages of small ethnic communities.

**Ms. Sadia Faizunnesa,** Director General, United Nations Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Bangladesh opined

that Bangladesh should be praised as a unique country where cultural diversity is embraced by all people regardless of sector, race, caste, etc. Diplomats of the country should prepare themselves to showcase the cultural diversity of Bangladesh. Referring Professor Dr. Syed Anwar Husain, Ms. Faizunnesa mentioned that 'unity in diversity' is prevailing in Bangladesh. Last year, the permanent mission in New York celebrated the *Pohela Boishakh* where half of the performers were from local diaspora. In that way the cultural diversity should be promoted. She emphasised on taking initiatives to exhibit the real beauty of cultural diversity of Bangladesh. Ms. Faizunnesa also highlighted the shift in global school of thought on the concept of development. She noted that when Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted in 2000 there was no mention of culture and how culture can contribute in the development. But when Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015, its unique characteristics had been its recognition of the importance of culture in development. She expressed her satisfaction at the mainstreaming of cultural diversity of ethnic communities in national







development strategies of Bangladesh. She concluded by saying that Bangladesh needs to work on sustainable development and for that promoting cultural diversity is imperative.

**Ms. Ukhengching Marmam**, Student, Asian University for Women, Chittagong asked why ethnic people from CHT Area are scared of uniformed forces? She also noted that if people are scared, how it is possible to establish peace and promote diversity in CHT area.

In response to the question, **Major General A K M Abdur Rahman, ndc, psc**, Director General, BISS opined that

it is a normal human tendency to be scared of the uniformed forces. Whenever people see somebody wearing a uniform with weapons, they consider those people are from different class. That is the main barrier. This has not only happened in the CHT, but has happened around the globe. Sharing his personal experience, General Rahman mentioned that he received four bullet injury during the counterinsurgency operation in CHT. But he has no animosity against the people of CHT rather he has a warm feelings for them. He stressed the importance of transfer of soft feelings in building and maintaining warm relations. He further added that weapons might solve problem, but it cannot erase the problem.



**Major General (Retd.) Anup Kumar Chakma, ndc, psc**, former Bangladesh Ambassador to Myanmar supplemented Major General A K M Abdur Rahman's remarks by adding that in Malaysia the counterinsurgency programme is known as pacification programme. They want their military to get involved with the local community to carry on their activities to pacify people. They also get involved in different social activities like fighting flash floods, bush fire, building houses in cooperation with the local community to increase their acceptance. These are all parts of the pacification programme to win the hearts and minds of local people. He further added that promoting cultural diversity

will also help the pacification programmes of the armed forces, especially in the CHT area of Bangladesh.

**Mr. Naba Bikram Kishore Tripura, ndc**, Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs added that Bangladesh government has some pacification programmes in CHT area. But the title of the programme has changed to 'Peace and Harmony'.





Brigadier General (Retd.) M Sakhawat Hussain, ndc, psc, former Election Commissioner of Bangladesh shared his personal experience to underscore the warm relations between uniformed forces and CHT people. According to him, it is very important to go near to those people living in the CHT area. It is not true that people are always scared of the uniformed forces. For instance, in Bandarban, every military camp has a school run by the army, but taught by the local people in their own language. So there are different stories. He also emphasised on giving special attention to the smaller ethnic communities because they are the most deprived one. Brigadier General Sakhawat mentioned the name of the Lusai community in this regard. He said that there are many personal stories that young people should know to understand the relationship. Reciprocal approaches can make people feel good for each other.

Ambassador Farooq Sobhan, President, Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) and former Foreign Secretary congratulated BISS for organising such an important Seminar and praised the insightful keynote speech and perceptive comments by the three discussants. For him, the central question from the title of the Seminar is: what is the best way to promote the cultural diversity of small ethnic groups in Bangladesh. In that regard, Ambassador Sobhan referred to a Seminar that was organised by BEI on a similar topic, which recommended for promotion of confidence building in the CHT through empowering communities and institutions. He emphasised on three key points. First, he stressed on educating the younger generation of Bangladesh at the foundation level on the importance of cultural diversity and the need to respect and appreciate the diversity. He stated that 'cultural tolerance' needs to be enshrined within this education process. Ambassador Sobhan supported the idea of Ms. Sadia Faizunnesa, Director General, the United Nations Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and mentioned that the way of projection of cultural diversity in the global forum is critically important for Bangladesh's image. Secondly, Ambassador Sobhan argued that for Bangladesh to show necessary understanding, respect and appreciation for cultural diversity, it should be promoted both at home and abroad. He said that the rapidly expanding Bangladeshi diaspora across the world should also be sensitised on the strength of cultural diversity in Bangladesh's image building at the global level. Finally, Ambassador Sobhan urged the Government of Bangladesh to set up a Commission which will provide a 'status report' and a set of recommendations on ways to promote cultural diversity in the country.



Major General (Retd.) Jiban Kanai Das, ndc, psc compared his service experience of 1972-1974 in the CHT region with his later experiences with the same region. General Das stated that the peaceful ambience of the early 1970s in the CHT region got deteriorated in the following decades. However, the government has been very sensitive to bring back that peaceful ambience. General





Das stressed upon being respectful and sensitive in the formulation of any government policy regarding cultural diversity. He observed that the majority ethnic group has the bigger responsibility to be sensitive regarding the diversity and should cross the fence to understand the problems of the minority ethnic groups.

**Mr. Lokkhi Kanto Sen**, a member of the Manipuri Community Sylhet asked the panel whether the Manipuri community will receive textbooks for the primary education in Manipuri language, since the government already published textbooks for few ethnic groups. Mr. Sen recommended for setting up a research institute on Manipuri Culture at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology. He

also urged the government to patronise the Manipuri Raj Purnima festival, which is getting popular among the mainstream population. Mr. Sen recommended for setting up a cultural institute for the plain land ethnic groups similar to the institutes for the CHT ethnic groups.

**Lieutenant Colonel (Retd.) Md. Shahadat Hossain, psc** stated that the popular perception of ethnic minority groups being antagonistic to military personnel is not entirely true. He shared his own experience of having close ties with the ethnic minority groups of the CHT. He requested the government to establish a tribal cultural village like Kunming, China, which could be a main attraction for tourists. He added that the ethnic communities should not oppose

the establishment of such ethnic cultural village.



**Mr. Bonipak Khongla**, Representative from Khasi Community, said that Khasis are famous for their betel leaf cultivation. Normally they build their villages high on the hilltop in deep forest. He informed the audience that there are about 30,000 Khasi people living in 72 villages which is known as 'punji' in Sylhet. Khasis have a rich tradition and culture. He requested the government to establish a cultural academy in Sylhet to promote their culture.

**Mr. Kyawshwehla Marma**, Chairman, Bandarban Hill District Council appreciated the government's initiative for printing pre-primary level textbooks in five ethnic languages for the children of different small ethnic communities. In this regard, he mentioned that though the initiative is a commendable one, but the (Hill District Council) was not fully prepared to implement it as it could not train a sufficient number of teachers to teach the students in their own languages.



# Address by the Chief Guest



**Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi**

*Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister on International Affairs  
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*

Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister on International Affairs stated that in a strange way, the CHT has largely been neglected from the understanding of the knowledge base of the majority population despite the existence of a strong linkage in professional and touristic capacity. Professor Rizvi mentioned that his association with the CHT predates the construction of Kaptai dam or the Kaptai Lake. He considers his relationship with the region as the love for one of the most beautiful places that he has ever travelled. However, in this place of serene beauty, some of the greatest tragedies took place that human being can imagine. He expressed his satisfaction that the CHT has moved on from those tragedies and Professor Rizvi feels it is important for the nation to move forward towards a more constructive and creative phase. The Honourable Adviser believes that the difficulties in understanding CHT derived from the post-colonial nations being the products of modernism. The teachings of modernists like Samuel P. Huntington argues that the identity of a nation is the only modern identity and identity in any other form is pre-modern and in time that will fade away leaving behind only nationalism and nation states. Unfortunately, many of the post-colonial leaders who fought anti-colonial wars subscribed to this idea that once a nation is created the pre-modern elements will be removed. However, since the decolonisation period, long historical experience proved two things: firstly, primordial loyalties and identities do not go away and one should be proud of these identities. Secondly, there is no such thing as one single identity; people have multiple identities and the idea that citizens should forsake all other identities in exchange of single particular identity has been at the core of all problems that modern nation states face today. By ignoring Bengali particularities, Pakistanis thought, they would make Bangladeshis embrace single identity build on Pakistani nationalism. It was counterproductive and as a result Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation. Hence, Bangladesh does not want to repeat the mistake that the Pakistanis committed. The Honourable Adviser stated that post-colonial states are multinational and multicultural states. He believes, both nationalism and national cohesiveness are important in the nation building process, but at the same time, accommodating diversity is imperative in order to create a cohesive and strong nationalism. Diversity is not a distracting force, rather when citizens feel their identities are being recognised they will think they constitute part of a whole.



Professor Rizvi stated that the government accomplished a lot in accommodating and recognising this diversity. However, he feels that there is still room for improvement. He also mentioned that somehow the media misses out on government's accomplishment in the implementation of the CHT Peace accord. Professor Rizvi believes there is a good reason for the media to miss out on the accomplishments as he explained, the government already transferred the power to the autonomous Hill Council. However, the Hill Council needs to build its own institutional capacities and institution building is a slow process. Hence, it will take some time for the Hill Council to achieve the required capacities. Professor Rizvi was delighted that the amendment to the Land Commission Act is passed, which has been the single biggest impediment to the full implementation of the CHT Peace Accord. However, he regretted the fact that it took 17 years for the amendment to take place despite the presence of consent from both sides. Distrust and suspicion have engendered in these years, which will take time to go away. He also expressed his strong belief that once the implementation process of the Act gets fully materialised, the nation will leave behind the doubts and move forward. He stressed that the Peace Accord is not a zero-sum game, rather it is a positive-sum game which will restore peace and stability in the Hill Tracts region. Professor Rizvi assured and expressed government's strong commitments that the citizens dwelling in the CHT region with legitimate claim to his/her land will not be deprived. He stated that peace needs to be given an opportunity and there is a need to build trust in each other. Professor Rizvi pleaded to the citizens to have patience and give the Commission enough time to resolve 24 thousand land dispute applications. He believes most of these disputes are simple in nature and solution can be delivered expeditiously.

On the topic of the need to protect the diversity, the Honourable Adviser stated that diversity does not make a society weak rather it makes a society stronger and equip to tackle different sorts of problems. The intellectual argument behind this logic is, in a symmetrical or homogenous society where everyone speaks the same language or comes from the same culture or have the same socio-cultural experience, tend to develop 'group thinking', which does not allow to question the basis for collectively constructed



ideas, norms or ethics. The importance of diversity is: it will provide diverse perspectives, which will ask questions and raise issues and in return, will aid to clarify minds of the people and provide progression to the society. Many Western universities are providing scholarship to bring students from diverse backgrounds to make their classroom as diverse as possible to develop their education process. Professor Rizvi stated that from the perspective of aesthetics or beauty, it is imperative to nurture the diversity so that the nation can be developed to its full potential. He reminded everyone of the values of the Liberation War in 1971, which was pluralism, secularism and democracy. All these three values were enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh. In order to create a cohesive society and fulfil the dream of *Sonar Bangla*, each ethnic group must retain its distinctive identity based on these three principles.

The Honourable Adviser mentioned democracy as a 'double edged sword' and quoted Sir Winston S. Churchill, "of all the bad governments, democracy is the best". However, he stated that democracy has a crucial flaw which is democracy counts heads and creates a society for majoritarian rule. In a homogenous society, majoritarian rule may work, but in plural society it will not work as institutions, laws need to be tailored to include the opinion of the minority.



# Remarks by the Chair



**Mr. Naba Bikram Kishore Tripura, ndc**

*Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs  
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*

At the beginning of his remarks, **Mr. Naba Bikram Kishore Tripura, ndc**, Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs expressed that he was privileged to have the opportunity to lead the Bangladesh team to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) for the last three consecutive years, starting from 2014. This year, this is going to be the 16<sup>th</sup> session of the PFII, where they are going to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Though Bangladesh has not ratified this document, the government has implemented many of the subjects of declaration. He felt lucky that for the fourth time, he is going to lead the delegation to the UN forum. He argued that human beings are diverse. They differ in opinions, races, nationalities, gender, ethnicity, class and so much more. All people feel pain and joy despite their differences. Today the changes in time and technology have made it impossible for a group of people to live without interacting with other groups or communities. Often people of different cultural and geographical background meet at International conferences, education exchange programmes, sports, etc. He argued that in the history of mankind discrimination based on cultural differences has been a common phenomenon. Many people lost their lives in the struggle to achieve equal rights in multicultural society. Properties have been destroyed due to lack of trust and understanding among different ethnic groups. For that reason, it is imperative to understand and promote cultural diversity among different ethnic communities. Diversity has many benefits. It creates a richness in opinions. It makes different ethnic groups, compassionate to each other. It opens up new opportunities and diversity is important for healthy and sustainable lifestyle. Mr. Tripura stated that even if the size of ethnic population is below one per cent, it needs to be preserved, that is Bangladesh's constitutional obligation. Through the insertion of Article 23 (a) in the Constitution, state has taken the responsibility for the preservation, promotion and development of the unique cultures of ethnic communities. He quoted from Bertrand Russell, though he said that it was not verbatim: at the end, a nation or civilisation is judged on the basis of how it treats its ethnic minorities and women.





Mr. Tripura narrated about what they do as a delegation to the UNPFII. Then he read a statement of 2014 which they call as intervention.

**“Bangladesh Intervention at Round Table 3: Indigenous People’s Lands, Territories and Resources during the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples, 22-23 September 2014, New York:**

*Madame Co-Chair and distinguished participants,*

Constitution of Bangladesh recognizes the fundamental rights of all our citizens irrespective of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. As a twice over the post- colonial state, we consider all our citizens to be indigenous to our land. Our Constitution underscores the importance of protecting and promoting the unique local cultures and traditions of our ethnic communities.

Bangladesh has the world’s eighth largest population living in the planet’s most densely populated areas next only to the city states. Despite the ensuing competition over resources, our Government remains sensitized to the need for protection, preservation and conservation of the lands and resources belonging to our ethnic communities.

Our Government remains committed as ever to implementing Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord signed in 1997. Till date, as per the Accord, up to 29 subjects out of 33 have been transferred to the three Hill Districts Councils. The traditional cultural expansion, customs and traditional knowledge of our ethnic minorities are being preserved and promoted through the Cultural Institutions set up by the Government.

In regard to land management, the amended Hill District Council Act 1989, vests the authority to give prior approval for any kind of lease, purchase, sale, transfer of acquisition of land in the CHT region to

the Councils themselves. The Councils are also given the authority to collect land development taxes in the region. The CHT Accord contains additional provision concerning the return of certain lands to their original owners.

Lastly, the issue of amending the Land Dispute Commission Act, 2001 and thus reconstituting the Commission itself remains under the Government's active consideration. In view of the complication that arose following the formation of the earlier Land Commission, it would be crucial that all concerned stakeholders were duly consulted and taken on-board in further amending the law by the Parliament. The Government would expect that all parties would come forward to strengthen its hands in moving towards a peaceful and constructive outcome soon.

The Government of Bangladesh actively supports the promotion and protection of the rights of minorities, including indigenous and tribal people, anywhere in the world. In keeping with our principled position, it is a priority for the Government to preserve the land and resources of our ethnic minorities that form an integral part of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious composition of our nation."



# Vote of Thanks



**Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad**  
*Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS*

In his deliberation, **Ambassador Munshi Faiz Ahmad**, Chairman, Board of Governors, BISS stated that the keynote presentation by Professor Husain elucidated the whole gamut of Bangladesh's culture, its various aspects and how it incorporates and represents those including the culture and lifestyles of small ethnic groups. The distinguished panel of discussants reflected on the topic and the presentation extensively, thus providing their valuable insights. He also mentioned that remarks from the honourable session chair, Mr. Naba Bikram Kishore Tripura, ndc, Secretary, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, enriched the understanding about the topic. Ambassador Ahmad stated that the address by the chief guest, Professor Dr. Gowher Rizvi, Adviser to the Honourable Prime Minister on International Affairs, enlightened the Seminar about cultural diversity in Bangladesh; how the government is undertaking different initiatives to preserve, uphold, and promote those diversities. He observed that the address by Dr. Rizvi informed the audiences regarding the various special measures taken by the government, which include: measures of positive discrimination to help these small ethnic communities to join the mainstream, contribute more meaningfully to their own community development and greater national development.

Ambassador Ahmad stated that the more a country can accommodate diverse peoples and cultures, the richer and more vibrant it becomes culturally. The major components in the culture of a particular ethnic group would include: language, food and food habits, dress, religion/faith, rituals, festivals/festivities, history and traditions, occupations and livelihood, in other words, their complete lifestyle. While pursuing preservation and promotion of their cultures, all these components should be kept in mind. Bangladesh as the champion of the mother languages, feels a special commitment to ensure education in their own mother language for the children of all small ethnic communities. Ambassador Ahmad stated that Bangladesh has numerous small ethnic groups; every group has their distinctive culture and lifestyle. As Bangladesh starts working on the SDGs after successful pursuance of the MDGs, the question of inclusiveness in these efforts becomes all the more important. A major aspect of this inclusiveness will be to find ways of including and incorporating the various small ethnic groups in Bangladesh in the process. The country remains dedicated to preserving and promoting cultural diversity, and incorporate these into the mainstream cultural life. Ambassador Ahmad further added that people always work better together, when they appreciate and celebrate diversities. These



ethnic groups in Bangladesh, in many ways, enjoy more privileges and have attained better social development indices than the Bengali majority. While talking about incorporation, one must be careful to not equate it with assimilation. He further mentioned that people from minority groups should be assisted and encouraged to promote and preserve their culture. Their incorporation into the mainstream culture of Bangladesh will ensure further enrichment and vibrancy of the national culture. He hoped that the deliberation and discussion of the Seminar will provide useful insights and constructive guidelines for achieving these goals.

Ambassador Ahmad extended his thanks to the participants for attending the Seminar and making it a successful one. He also thanked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their wholehearted support and cooperation as well as his colleagues from BISS for their hard work and sincere efforts.





# Summary of Suggestions & Recommendations

Many suggestions and recommendations have been put forward during the presentation and discussion session of the Seminar. Some of the suggestions are as follows:

- Confidence building needs to be promoted in the CHT through empowering communities and institutions.
- Emphasis has been given on educating the younger generation of Bangladesh at the foundation level on the importance of cultural diversity so that they can learn to respect and appreciate diversity.
- Bangladeshi diaspora needs to be sensitised on the importance of cultural diversity in building Bangladesh's global image.
- A Commission by the government is needed to provide recommendations on ways to promote cultural diversity.
- For government policy formulation, there is a need for being respectful and sensitive to cultural diversity.
- A suggestion has been made to set up a research institute for Manipuri Culture at the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology.
- There was another suggestion for setting up cultural institutes for plain land ethnic groups is imperative.
- The Hill Commission needs to build up its own institutional capacity for the smooth implementation process of the CHT Peace Accord.
- A suggestion has been made to identify the problems of ethnic communities as well as their solutions to promote cultural diversity.
- It has been suggested that ethnic communities should be provided with the opportunity to flourish and should not develop the feelings that they are left out from the mainstream population.
- Diplomats of the country need to prepare themselves for showcasing the cultural diversity of Bangladesh in front of the whole world.
- Emphasis has been given on taking initiatives to exhibit the real beauty of cultural diversity of Bangladesh.

- A recommendation has been made to enhance pacification programmes in the CHT area to increase the acceptance of the uniformed forces.
- Special attention should be given to smaller ethnic communities because of their vulnerabilities and deprivations.
- Initiatives need to be undertaken to preserve personal stories to enable young generation understand the warm relationship between the members of uniformed forces and CHT people.
- Emphasis should be given on transferring of soft feelings in building and maintaining warm relations among the members of ethnic communities and uniformed forces.
- Concentrated efforts should be made on preserving oral history in order to preserve the rich heritage of different small ethnic groups.
- There should be an institute of regional languages or ethnic languages at different public universities.
- More importance should be given on soft power as well as incorporating soft power with legal framework and with hard power, such as constitutional obligations for preserving the cherished 'unity in diversity'.
- The majoritarian needs for development in the ethnic regions are to be synchronised with ethnic cultural ethos.

#### **Seminar Rapporteurs**

M. Ashique Rahman (Research Fellow)  
 A S M Tarek Hassan Semul (Research Officer)  
 Sajid Karim (Research Officer)  
 Samia Zaman (Research Officer)  
 Moutusi Islam (Research Officer)  
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