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A study on the social status of indigenous women in Rangpur, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Our society has not been able to break free from the subcontinent's conservative patriarchy. There is a tendency to oppress women in society. For indigenous women, the situation is worse considering ethnicity, gender, religion, identity, and class. However, indigenous women in Bangladesh face numerous crises due to existing political, economic, and cultural barriers and inequalities. This study explored indigenous women's social status in Bangladesh's Rangpur region. This research followed the qualitative method to gather data in the field through FGD (Focus Group Discussions) and KID (Key Informant Interviews). The study's findings show that lack of education, child marriage, prejudice, occupational oppression, insecurity, male superiority, the culture of forcing their decisions on women, and a lack of property rights are the most significant barriers to indigenous women's growth in the Rangpur region. Furthermore, owing to the lack of adequate access to electricity, the internet, newspapers, and television in this region, they are deprived of the free flow of the media. As a result, women are unaware of various matters, such as government-allocated facilities, budget allocation, initiatives, work plans, and policies, making their challenges more visible. In the face of such multi-faceted problems in indigenous communities, the services and benefits of the government of Bangladesh, BRAC, Grameen Bank, CCDB, and World Vision are inadequate or absent in some areas; several NGOs, such as RDRS and Caritas, are just beginning. On the other hand, NGOs are more interested in microcredit practices than in developmental activities. The findings further show that the thinking and lifestyle of indigenous women of Rangpur region are improving through modernization. Many women from indigenous communities are now working as physicians, police officers, and teachers, while many are studying at colleges and universities.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous women, Social status, Deprived, Changing lifestyle, Rangpur, Bangladesh

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INTRODUCTION

Indigenous peoples constitute about 2% of the total population in Bangladesh (Asad, 2019). At least 54 different indigenous communities belong here, and the number is more than 3 million (Pal *et al.*, 2017). The central indigenous communities are Chakma, Garo, Khasia, Santal, Mug, Tripura, Murang, etc. The majority live in the districts of Rangamati, Bandarban, and Khagrachhari. Indigenous communities can also be found in Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Bogura, Rangpur, and other districts throughout Bangladesh. In this study, the researcher focused on the communities in the district of Rangpur. The total population of Rangpur is 2534365; 50.91% are male, and 49.09% are female. 89.60% of the population are Muslims, 9.59% are Hindus, 0.50% are Christians, and 0.31% of the total population make up the indigenous nationals Santal and Orao (Bangladesh Population and Housing Census, 2015). These indigenous communities have coexisted in these region

for centuries, preserving their respective languages, customs, religions, traditions, and cultures.

Indigenous communities are considered minorities, and as a result, they are deprived of various privileges, including constitutional rights. In these communities, 'the situation of girls is the worst' (Hossain, 2009). Although women constitute over half of the indigenous communities, they have restricted opportunities and rights. Women are often 'exploited', and their 'inferior' status is based on ideology (Nasreen, 2009). The dominant ideology, which must be patriarchal, is responsible for women's subordination. Women are first and foremost subordinate to their families and then to the capitalist structure (Nasreen, 2009). So, even though some indigenous communities were progressing through the matriarchal social structure, they could not break the patriarchal shackles. They must be denied in every aspect of their lives, from families to society. Women from indigenous communities are underrepresented in education,

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health care, employment, and other areas, making it difficult for them to participate in sustainable development (Tripura, 2016).

Furthermore, continued violence against women from indigenous communities puts a damper on women's progress with their bravery and abilities. Minu Maria Moorangs, the convener of the Adivasi Women Network, said, "Even though peoples are so vocal about women's rights now, violence against women is not diminishing. That is gradually increasing. Mountains and plains—the images of indigenous communities being tortured are almost similar everywhere" (IPNewsBD, 2019). According to the Bangladesh Indigenous Human Rights Report 2016, cybercrimes and domestic violence against indigenous women and girls are on the rise, rarely published or discussed in the media. Although it is debated, it is not commonly practiced. There have been at least 32 incidents against women and children from indigenous communities as of June (Alam, 2020). In 2019, 53 women and children from indigenous communities were subjected to human rights abuses throughout the country. There were 26 incidents organized in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and 25 incidents organized in the plains. Throughout the year, 57 indigenous women and children have been physically and sexually abused in 53 incidents, of which six indigenous women and children have been killed after being raped (Somoy News, 2017).

There has been no significant change in indigenous women's empowerment or the reduction of violence against them. On the contrary, torture against them grew in several ways and types. The lack of government policy is one of the reasons for the vulnerability of women in these communities. Poverty alleviation strategies, forest policies, fisheries policies, etc., spoke of indigenous communities as marginalized peoples, but the women of these communities did not find a place in it. Article 38 of the National Women Development Policy 2011, entitled 'Special Program for Ethnic and Backward Group Women', states: 38.1 To ensure all the rights of the ethnic and backward groups of peoples for the development and growth of their womenfolk; 38.2 To take the initiative for the development of ethnic group women by sustaining their heritage and culture; 38.3 To undertake unique program aimed at the development of backward women; ethnic women have had to be content with this assurance (Chakraborty & Sarkar, 2014).

However, Bangladesh has achieved a lot in women's development as a whole, with women from indigenous communities also advancing more than ever before and playing an essential role in the development of their society and keeping the ethnic economy afloat. Indigenous communities believe that while the government's Seventh Five-Year Plan (2015/16-2019/20) mentions many initiatives for the indigenous community to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, they are insufficient. There is no initiative for women's equality or empowerment, especially among indigenous communities (Tripura, 2016). To help their families, 80% of indigenous women work outside, like men. When it comes to land inheritance, however, most ethnic communities deprive and ignore women. The national women's agenda has often neglected the topic of indigenous women. However, Section 7.2

of the 1996 National Women Development Policy suggested enacting a new law to offer complete and equitable rights to women on land, including inheritance, but this has yet to be achieved. One of the Sustainable Development Goals declared by the United Nations is to explore the social status of women belonging to the indigenous communities scattered in different parts of Bangladesh, how much their lives are improving, and how much they can improve. Considering all these factors, the current study explored the social status of Indigenous Women in Rangpur, Bangladesh.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The social status of indigenous women has been an ongoing issue of concern for researchers and scholars for many years. Indigenous women are often marginalized and face numerous challenges, including discrimination, poverty, and violence. This literature review aims to explore the social status of indigenous women through the analysis of various research articles, books, and other relevant literature, nationally and internationally.

Bangladesh Perspective

Chiroranjana Sarkar explored the position of women in the indigenous Santal Society of Bangladesh. Using 8 FGD (Focus Group Discussion) and PRAs (Participatory Rural Appraisal), he gathered data from 66 participants (36 women and 29 men) of the Santal community in Madhumath of Godagari Upazila of Rajshahi district and Aludanga village of Fulbari Upazila of Dinajpur district. The researcher found that workplace inequality, illiteracy, and early marriage were all major barriers to women's growth in the Santal society. As a result, the researcher emphasizes providing equitable opportunities for men and women in the home, expanding education, and ensuring equal involvement in social work and decision-making (Sarkar, 2010).

Santayana *et al.* (2011) analysed indigenous women's human rights issues in Bangladesh and found that the minority women are mainly deprived of equal rights to education, economic and employment sectors, political involvement, sexual, social, ideological, religious, and spiritual or pastoral lives. Dewan (2019) examined the social status of ethnic women of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The researcher found that hill society is heavily influenced by patriarchy, which creates barriers for women. While women provide more work than their male counterparts and have more mobility than non-indigenous women, the patriarchal form of questioning rights is still evident (Dewan, 2009).

Pal *et al.* (2017) explored the socio-economic status of the ethnic communities (Manipuri and Khasia) in Bangladesh. Using a pre-structured questionnaire, they gathered data from 113 (82 Manipuri & 31 Khasia) respondents from the Sylhet district. Researchers revealed that 73.17% of the Manipuri respondents had good socio-economic status, while this percentage for Khasia respondents was only 6.45%. Chakraborty and Sarkar (2014) conducted a study to explore the dynamics of the deprivation faced by indigenous women

in Bangladesh. Primary and secondary sources were applied to collect data. The findings suggest that the percentage of men and women in indigenous communities is nearly equal. Even then, women confess to different types of social deprivation and inequality, such as job insecurity, lack of participation in decision-making, land rights, schooling, and political visibility. Furthermore, women are underrepresented in minorities' social justice systems and programs to combat domestic violence. Researchers also indicated that the government, community, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) all have a role to play in alleviating indigenous women's plight (Chakraborty & Sarkar, 2014).

Ali *et al.* (2016) explored the causes of the problems of the ethnic Paharia people in Bangladesh. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, data was gathered through surveys, interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. Researchers have focused on land issues, education, and language, especially women's issues, and found that ethnic women face various challenges regularly, just like Bengali women. Three-quarters of women from ethnic groups are constantly concerned about their safety.

International Perspective

Bose (2009) found that women's education is more backward in indigenous communities. Indian indigenous women are more educated than indigenous Bangladeshi women (Bose, 2009). Sun and Du (1993) describe the employment situation of ethnic women in China. They found 44.2 million ethnic women out of 550 million women nationally. Ethnic working women were primarily young; 55.6% were aged 15–29 years, 37.88% were aged 30–49 years, and the proportion of illiterates and semi-illiterates was high (Sun & Du, 1993).

According to a UN Women Report (2015), women and girls are the most disadvantaged ethnic minority groups in Vietnam in terms of access to opportunities, resources, and raising their voices, while social norms denigrate and confine them to reproductive duties and domestic production (UN Women Report, 2015). Bhasin (2017) stated that tribal women, like women in all social groups, are more illiterate than men. Like other social groups, tribal women share problems related to reproductive health (Bhasin, 2017).

Razack (2014) found that Canadian indigenous women constitute a broad category of peoples with diverse social, economic, and political backgrounds and needs. They suffer a high degree of marginalization, discrimination, and disadvantage due to their gender, race, and class (Razack, 2014). This is exacerbated by their legal, cultural, and social status. Mihesuah (2010) focused on how American indigenous women experience a unique form of intersectional oppression that stems from the intersection of race, gender, and colonialism (Mihesuah, 2010).

Kirmayer *et al.* (2014) found that the social status of Canadian indigenous women is often measured in terms of their access

to basic human rights, such as healthcare, education, and employment. Haskins (2012) found that indigenous women in Canada face significant challenges in terms of healthcare access, education, and employment opportunities. The researcher also stated that indigenous women experience multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization that limit their social and economic mobility (Haskins, 2012). Reseih (2018) found that indigenous women in Canada living in remote or rural communities are additionally marginalized due to their geographical locations, as access to education and health care, for example, may be limited. Indigenous women also experience higher rates of gender-based violence, including physical and sexual abuse. The social and economic impacts of this have been described as “unprecedented” (Reseih, 2018).

From the discussions above, there have been many studies on indigenous women in both Bangladesh and internationally. The literature review provides insight into the social status of indigenous women, highlighting the systemic barriers they face in terms of education, employment, and political participation. However, no exact research has been conducted on the social status of indigenous women in Bangladesh's Rangpur region. The present research is meant to fill that gap. Since it is essential to understand the social status of indigenous women living in various regions of Bangladesh in order to implement initiatives to improve their lives, the research will be helpful for media workers, teachers-students, researchers, indigenous activists and individuals involved in indigenous thinking and activities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study followed the qualitative method to accomplish the research. The data was collected in the field through FGD (Focus Group Discussions) and KID (Key Informant Interviews). Using a multistage sampling technique, the study included women from the Anantapur, Kachabari, Bakram, and Mithapukur villages of the Rangpur region. These villages are inhabited by Santal, Mahari, Pahari, and Orao indigenous communities. A total of 4 FGDs were conducted separately with the women of the four sampled villages; a total of 84 indigenous women from different communities participated in these FGDs, and key informant interviews were conducted with the indigenous chiefs of the sampled villages.

Selection of Research Area

Rangpur is a district in Bangladesh's north western region, as shown in Figure 1. There are eight Upazilas in Rangpur, namely: Badarganj, Mithapukur, Gangachara, Kaunia, Rangpur Sadar, Pirgacha, Pirganj, and Taraganj. Here, Rangpur Sadar, Mithapukur, Badarganj, and Pirganj Upazilas are inhabited by indigenous communities. Therefore, the researchers selected these four Upazilas for this research. However, it is impossible to study all the Upazilas' indigenous women of the Rangpur region. So, the sampling process has been completed for qualitative analysis.

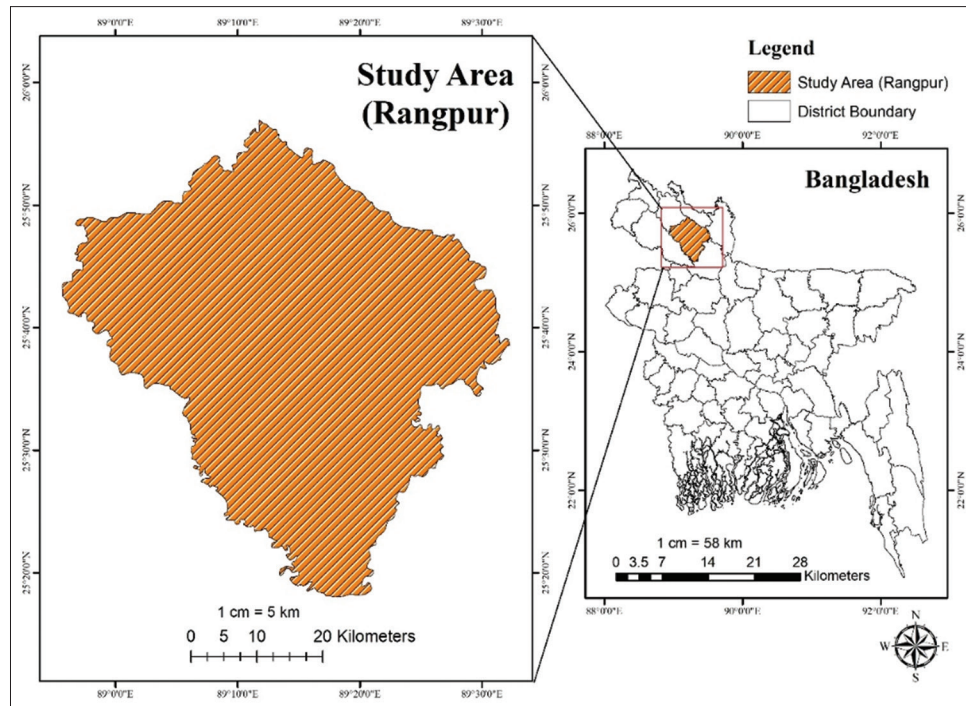


Figure 1: Location map of the study area (Rangpur)

Sampling

A multistage sampling technique was used for this sampling. Santal, Mahari, Paharia, and Orao indigenous communities live in 9 out of the 15 Unions of Pirganj. The Santal and Orao communities live in a wide area in the 15 No. Lohani Para Union of Badarganj. Besides, Orao and Santal live in 14 Unions in Mithapukur Upazila. Mithapukur has the highest number of Orao tribes in the region, and several Santal and Orao live in Paurashava at Rangpur Sadar. One Union from these four Upazilas and one village from the Union were selected through a simple random lottery. As a part of the research, women of the indigenous communities of Anantapur village of Chatra Union No. 14 of Pirganj, Kachabari village of Lohani Para Union No. 15 of Badarganj, Bakram village of Rangpur Sadar and Mithapukur village of Durgapur Union No. 14 of Mithapukur Upazila had been included in the study, as shown in Figure 2.

Data Collection

There are 25 families in Anantapur village, 90 families in Kachabari village, 190 families in Mithapukur village, and 34 families in Bakram village. From these villages, a total of 4 separate FGDs (Focus Group Discussions) were conducted separately with the women of the four sampled villages. Each FGD composed of between 15 and 20 participants and included different age groups and professions; in total, 84 women participated. Key informant interviews were done with the indigenous chiefs of the villages.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Indigenous Peoples

There is no universal phenomenon of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples believe they should not need a universal definition to recognize and protect their rights. Because the diversity of the indigenous peoples of different countries of the world cannot be accurately captured by anyone's definition, as a consequence of this classification, some indigenous peoples may be excluded from this definition. Furthermore, the 'Indigenous people's concept is still evolving; new topics are continually being applied to this concept (Chittagong Hill Tracts Citizens Committee and Indigenous Facilitators Group, 2011). However, for the sake of their work, numerous international organizations have attempted to identify who the indigenous peoples are. For the convenience of this study, one can identify the indigenous peoples from the definitions.

According to the Special-Rapporteur of the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, José Martínez Cobo, indigenous communities, peoples, and countries are those who, because of their historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that arose on their territory, consider themselves separate from other sectors of the societies presently dominating in those territories, or sections of them. They are now underrepresented in society (Sarah, 2017). Through their own cultural, social, and legal systems, they are resolved to conserve, develop, and convey to following generations their ancestral territory and ethnic identity as the foundation of their continued existence as peoples (Henriksen,

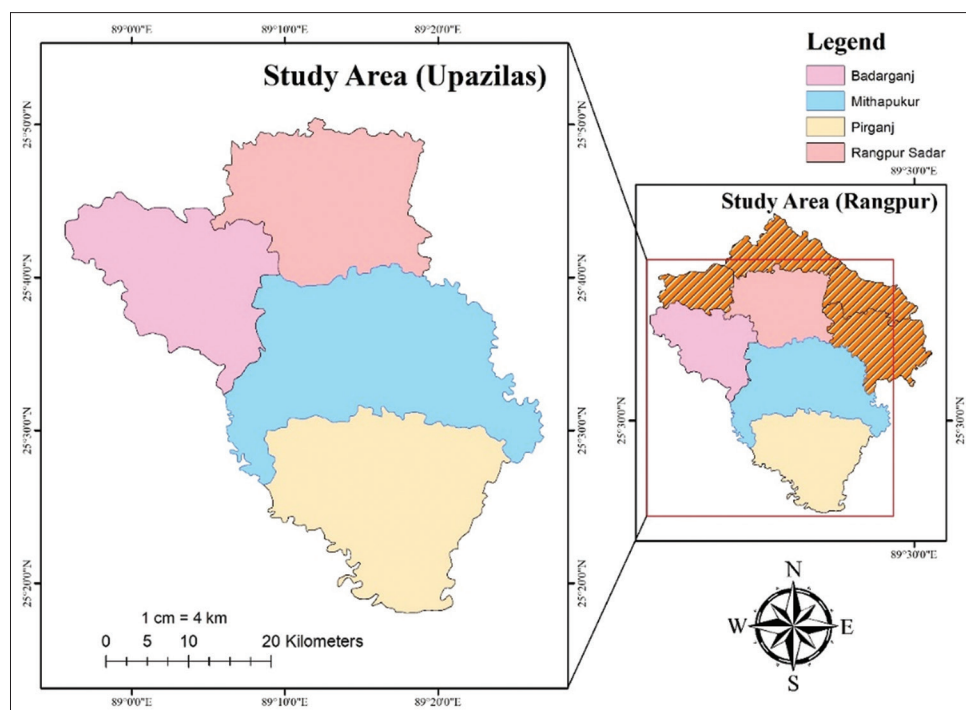


Figure 2: Location map of the sample study area (Upazilas)

2008). The statement of coverage of the ILO Convention No. 169 - article 1 (1) (b) - identifies “indigenous peoples” as peoples in independent countries who are viewed as indigenous because of their descent from populations that inhabited the country, or a geographic location to which the land belongs, at the time of conquest or colonization, or the establishment of present state boundaries, and who, regardless of their legal condition, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural, and political institutions (Henriksen, 2008).

Indigenous peoples living in Bangladesh have been demanding recognition of their identity as ‘indigenous’ for a long time. However, in the constitution of Bangladesh, they have been mentioned as ‘tribes’, ‘minorities’, ‘ethnic groups’, and ‘small communities’. However, the constitutions of many countries worldwide recognize the identity, existence, culture, and rights of Indigenous peoples, such as Venezuela, America, Canada, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Etc. In Asia, indigenous communities in Cambodia, India, China, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Etc., are either constitutionally recognized or recognized by various state laws and policies (Ferdous, 2013).

National Budget and Indigenous Women

The Development Assistance program for Special Areas (except CHT) of the Prime Minister’s Office of the Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh was started in 1996-97 with an allocation of BDT 5 crore. The main goal of this program is the socio-economic development of the indigenous peoples living in the plains of different districts of the country. The program is being implemented with full government funding from the beginning. BDT 116 crore was allocated in favour of

the program in the last seven financial years from 2010-11 to 2016-17. The development allocation for the backward peoples of 61 districts over the last seven years for the plain indigenous peoples is far less than required. However, the annual allocation for indigenous groups in the plains, called ‘Development Assistance for Special Areas’, has increased slightly. For the 2019-20 fiscal year, the allocation for this sector was BDT 50 crore; for the upcoming financial year, it had been proposed to be fixed at BDT 80 crore (Prothom Alo, 2020). However, there is no separate allocation for indigenous women in the gender budget of Bangladesh. Even the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and the Special Task Force of the Prime Minister’s Office has no special allocation for financial assistance to Indigenous women in traditional economic activities and to enhance skills of indigenous women. The National Women’s Development Policy (2011) does not mention anything special for indigenous women and children (Tripura, 2016).

Government and International Law

The Prevention of Women and Children Repression Act 2000 (as amended in 2003), the establishment of the Court for Suppression of Violence against Women and Children, the formulation of National Women Development Policy 2011, guidelines against Sexual Harassment in Public Place 2010, verification of Birth Certificate or National Identity Card guidelines and the recent enactment of the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017, political, economic and social inequality and deprivation including violence, rape, abduction, murder of women and indigenous peoples in the prevailing society had not progressed as expected (Tripura, 2016). On the other hand, the government of Bangladesh has ratified the ILO Convention, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

(ICRC), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of discrimination against women. So, there are various obligations to protect the rights of indigenous women. According to the provisions of international law, the signatory state has to include these laws in the national law of its country. Nevertheless, the Bangladesh government has not yet fully incorporated these international human rights and environmental laws into the national law to protect indigenous women's socio-economic, political, informational, and cultural rights (Chakraborty & Sarkar, 2014).

Indigenous Women's Status in their Organization

These indigenous communities have their own national and local level organizations. Such as National Adivasi Coordinating Committee, Adivasi Forum, Jatiya Adivasi Parishad, Adivasi Kalyan Samiti, Tribal Welfare Association, Jayenshahi Adivasi Unnayan Parishad, Khasia Welfare Society, Rakhine Development Association, Rakhine Development Foundation, etc. (Chakraborty & Sarkar, 2014). Notable activities of these organizations include organizing the indigenous peoples, preserving their traditions, and conducting cultural activities. In addition, the organizations work on various issues, including the rights of indigenous peoples, and land rights. However, very few indigenous people's organizations prioritize their programs on issues related to indigenous women's issues. Patriarchal attitudes work in most of these organizations (Chakraborty & Sarkar, 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Indigenous Women's Labour Division and Wages

Employment and fair wages are the constitutional rights of all men and women. Article 20 of the Constitution of Bangladesh states, "work is a right, a duty, and a matter of honour for every citizen who is capable of working, and everyone shall be paid for his work based on the principle of from each according to his abilities, to each according to his work." Although it is mentioned in the constitution, it is not valid in reality. Since men do most of the work in society, women have to work harder in the agricultural system. The picture of Bengali women in society, and the lives of indigenous women, is no exception. Indigenous women have to play an equal role in all household and outdoor activities for the family's well-being. In addition, housework, childcare, water, fuel collection, cooking, and even shopping is part of their job. They still acknowledge the division of labour, but women from indigenous communities are more likely to be discriminated against than Bengali women. In this case, different images are seen in different regions. According to the Santal community of Anantapur village in Pirganj Upazila of Rangpur, if a Bengali farm labourer gets BDT 200, the indigenous farm labourer gets BDT 150 to 180. In this case, the condition of indigenous women farmworkers is even worse. Women get BDT 100 to 110 even if they work equal to one man.

Although the indigenous women of Mithapukur village say that they get fewer wages than men, they do not get fewer wages than Bengali women. Another woman from Kachabari village said she received low wages. She receives BDT 80 to 100 per day for fieldwork. Sometimes money is available after repeated requests, often talking about higher wages and lower wages at the end of the day. Moreover, indigenous women often go to different places outside their villages to work. They often go to the countryside to work together, but the husband and wife do not get many opportunities to work together. Many are only interested in giving jobs to women of indigenous peoples on the condition of paying less. In this case, if they demand money for extra work, they always try to adjust the work by saying 'I will exclude it from tomorrow'. As a result, indigenous women are becoming cheap workers in the labour market.

Education and the Reality of Indigenous Women

The chiefs of indigenous communities and those concerned are that in the villages of Anantapur, Bakram, Mithapukur, and Kachabari, the indigenous people's literacy rate may be 60%, 70%, 90%, and 70%, respectively. In this case, 80% of indigenous women are admitted to primary school. About 40% are in secondary school, and very few women are graduating; most of them drop out before the end of school life. In this scenario, the Mithapukur indigenous peoples are far ahead in terms of education. That being said, there were no educational institutions in the area of indigenous peoples before; now, several educational institutions have been established at the initiative of the government and NGOs. Even then, the education rate of women is much lower than that of men. In the field of education, both indigenous women and men focus on the education of boys. They think that the boys will listen to them in the future, and take responsibility for their upbringing, so they need to be taught to read even amid their financial hardship. Although, this mentality has changed a bit compared to the past.

From their discussions, a few obstacles can be identified in indigenous women's education. Due to financial problems, women started working in the fields and at home early. According to several indigenous peoples, many girls have to get married early due to the difficulty of feeding an extra family member, so they are no longer educated. Women are also reluctant to go to school because of language problems, distance from the settlement to the school, and social attitudes. Many blame the government for the lack of education for indigenous women. According to them, if the government solved the problems of the indigenous peoples and helped them financially, that effect would also play a role in developing women's education. In terms of the preceding discussion, it can be said that besides economic problems, security, and various forms of inequality, the women of the indigenous peoples in the Rangpur region are also lagging far behind in education. However, many indigenous peoples now believe that both boys and girls should be educated and take the initiative to provide them with education.

Healthcare System for Indigenous Women

All indigenous communities have access to the government health care system, including divisional hospitals, a health centre in each local administrative area (Upazila), and community clinics. So, the status of women in health, education, and employment in Bangladesh has improved significantly. Despite this, women have a substantially lower health status than men. Moreover, the health condition of indigenous women is comparatively more deplorable. In this case, the health of the indigenous women of the Rangpur region, who are lacking in education, is not as expected. Due to unhygienic practices and a lack of health consciousness, many peoples suffer from numerous health issues at a young age. Women in Santal suffer from the disease at a lower rate than males. They are more likely to suffer from colds, itching, jaundice, diarrhea, pneumonia, abdominal pain, nausea, malnutrition, anemia, diarrhea, and other common illnesses. They go to the village doctors, Kabiraj, or the closest health centre, to overcome their health issues.

In many cases, NGOs provide their own health care. However, the government has no separate healthcare system for them. Moreover, government health services do not reach the areas where they live. There are many obstacles to getting government health care as far as it reaches. Many women say they are looked down on and neglected in government health centres. Others said that they would see the doctor at the hospital without any complications or challenges. They prefer midwives over doctors when it comes to giving birth. As a result, the maternal mortality rate is comparatively high in these populations. However, even though family planning is available in the village, no one is interested in using it. They are opposed to family planning. Family planning and even proper medical treatment are unavailable due to a lack of awareness and reform. Those who live in the city and those who are relatively educated have different experiences.

Inheritance of Property

Of about 54 indigenous communities living in Bangladesh, only a part of the Garo, Khasia, Rakhine, and Marma women can acquire land ownership through inheritance. In the Rangpur region, it is rare for indigenous women to inherit property. However, if no sons are in the family, the girls get the property. In addition, if the father gives the property to the daughter on his own, they inherit it; otherwise, the daughter or wife has no claim to the man's property. In other words, women face discrimination in the acquisition of property in various areas. New property and inheritance laws have been enacted for Hindu women. However, in our country, indigenous women have no law on the ownership of property. They are regulated mainly by numerous customary laws and customs and Hindu-specific legislation. In this situation, the majority of women who participated in the FGD said that the government should raise awareness and ensure that women have a fair right in the ownership of family-owned and father's land, as well as protect their property rights and adopt necessary legislative measures.

Dowry and Early Marriage

Child marriage is one of the other problems in the country, considering the socio-economic context. After enacting the 'Child Marriage Prohibition Act 2017', when the storm of discussion and criticism is raging on the pages of newspapers, television channels, and social media, the effectiveness of the women's and human rights activists' movement is being questioned. Nevertheless, child marriage has emerged as a severe problem, especially for women belonging to indigenous communities. Most marriages in indigenous communities are consummated when the daughter is 12-13 years old. According to the law of Bangladesh, considering the age of marriage (girls), it must be called child marriage. In response to asking about the cause of child marriage, many parents said that girls could not get married when they are older, and it will not be possible to get a 'good' groom. Many peoples seem to believe that a girl must care for her family and that the earlier she begins the better. Furthermore, since girls do not have to be responsible for their parents' upkeep, they are married off at a young age due to a reluctance to educate them.

In addition to child marriage, dowry is another obstacle for indigenous women. Although in ancient times, the dowry system was not prevalent in the indigenous communities. Over time, indigenous peoples from other communities have adopted the practice. However, there was a dowry system among the Santals and other indigenous communities in the Rangpur region, but it did not take a stronghold in Orao society. In Orao society, men traditionally take the girl home with a dowry. This is not to claim that the stakes were not high in the past; the minimum dowry was BDT 25; nevertheless, poor agricultural families would have struggled to collect this amount of money. According to knowledge collected through interviews, there is no strict regulation on taking dowry in this field today. Child marriage and the dowry system, on the other hand, are more common in societies that are behind in terms of education, such as Santal. This is not the case among urban and highly educated indigenous communities. According to an indigenous woman studying at Dhaka University, 'When the country, the nation, the state, and society build resistance to eradicate dowry and child marriage, there is hope that Bengali women, as well as indigenous women, will come out of this stalemate. At the same time, there is a need to create awareness in the media to prevent child marriage.'

Impact of Prevailing Beliefs and Superstitions on Indigenous Women

Different kinds of prejudices and beliefs have been continuously going on in the society of indigenous communities for ages. The influence of superstition and blind faith is greater on women in particular. Among the sampled villages, in the Orao group of Kachabari village in Badarganj, the woman whose feet look like clogs and who eats before her husband is called 'Alokhi'. Different beliefs and reforms regarding 'Lokhi' and 'Alokhi' women are widely prevalent in Orao society. Besides, a superstition is prevalent in the Santal society of other

villages that if women become independent and participate in development work, it is harmful to their healthy bodies. Besides, many groups have a system to separate them by calling them ‘profane’ during menstruation. Women respect their husbands like gods, even though they are drunk, ‘dissolute’, and silently accept his hundreds of tortures for the sake of their destiny. Indigenous women often assume it is normal not to seek their opinion in decision-making or arbitration. In some instances, these superstitions are passed on from generation to generation by the elders in the family.

Although prejudices against indigenous women have begun to fade due to their education and relocation to the cities, prejudices still exist in society. An indigenous woman, a student of Begum Rokeya Government College in Mithapukur village, said, ‘These customs are a bigger problem than poverty in our society. I have also seen how brutal society can be only because of superstition. While studying, I felt that it was necessary to get rid of all these prejudices for the progress of the indigenous communities. So not only to meet the world’s needs by doing a job but also to cut the prejudices of our indigenous society, to make peoples aware, we want to explain science to everyone.’

Indigenous Women and the Free Flow of Information

Freedom of information is not only a fundamental human right; it also plays a vital role in meeting other basic needs of the individual. In this case, indigenous communities in the area are deprived of the free flow of information about government-mandated facilities, budget allocation, initiatives and action plans, and policies. The village head of Anantapur village in Pirganj said that when the government distributes khas land to the landless, the information does not reach the village. Women, in particular, are unaware of their rights under national and international law, starting with education, health, and the market. They do not recognize the various domestic abuses, and discriminatory attitudes, and are not aware of the laws that can be used to assert one’s rights, due to which they are being subjected to more deprivation and neglect. Many women are dying because they are unaware of the health regulations and are afflicted with different diseases. Deprived of such facilities, Rangpur’s indigenous communities lag behind other parts of the country regarding the availability of information. In many areas, electricity has not reached, while the internet, newspapers, and television are not readily available. The village heads have stated that the responsibility of the country’s conscious citizens, media, and development workers in creating demand for information among indigenous communities should be significantly increased.

Inequality and Insecurity in the Workplace

Insecurity encompasses not only sexual harassment but also sexual harassment gestures, eve-teasing, and indecent remarks, all of which pose a severe threat to women’s feelings of insecurity. Many peoples avoid going to work because they are afraid of being misled by such beliefs, and others remain silent out of fear of embarrassment, an unpredictable outlook on society,

or the loss of a source of income. These undesirable situations cannot be daily in women’s lives, especially those belonging to indigenous communities. There are strict laws for the safety of women in Bangladesh.

Nevertheless, the reality is quite different. Even though several small indigenous women in the Rangpur region’s sampled villages work in various educational institutions and factories, they face numerous obstacles and inequalities at work. Many women claim that they have to work harder than usual. They suffer from insecurity in and around the workplace. Moreover, due to the remoteness of educational institutions, harassment on the way to school is still happening. So many indigenous women in these villages have dropped out of school. Poverty, low rates of education, and insecurity are also cited by many as reasons for the backwardness of indigenous women. However, there are not many restrictions on the movement of women belonging to indigenous communities. Indigenous women claim that when discussing the issue of women’s security in this country, it is necessary to talk about the security and opportunities of indigenous women, and the government should take more action to improve this situation.

Status of Indigenous Women as Village Heads

Although women from indigenous communities’ work in the field, they are not involved in management or policymaking. The insufficient number of highly educated women and the patriarchal mindset toward women are the primary reasons for this. As the social system of the indigenous communities in the Rangpur region is patriarchal, the older men make the socio-economic decisions as to who should be the head of the family and the village. The responsibilities of the village head are mainly carried out in the lineage. In this situation, since there is no capable older man to lead a family, only women hold the position of the family head, not the village head. Indigenous communities have a seven-member social body (Panchayat) in the judiciary, but women cannot participate in that structure. As a result, women do not get the opportunity to exercise any responsibility in resolving disputes. Naturally, social justice is in the hands of a man who controls everything in society, starting with the arbitration. Although there are more men in the posts of Carbari (Village Head) and Headman (Chief of Mouza Head) of the indigenous communities in the Chattogram Hill Tracts (CHT), women have been occupying those posts in recent times due to the demands of women. However, women do not play the role of village head in the villages sampled for this study, and there are no opportunities for women to participate in the seven problematic panchayats.

Furthermore, there is no written legal system in these areas for the indigenous communities. Ancient traditions have been used orally as common law for decades. In a patriarchal society and traditional continuity, many discriminatory practices and customs towards women remain. Many indigenous women and village heads agree that women are being deprived of equal justice because the legal procedure was completed in compliance with the unilateral patriarchal view due to the

absence of representation of village heads or women in the judiciary.

Success of Indigenous Women of Rangpur

The thinking and lifestyle of the indigenous women of the Rangpur region are changing in line with modern civilization. Despite the problems faced by indigenous women in various fields, the village head of Mithapukur stated that their lives have changed compared to the past. In many places, women are seen as having an edge in higher education over men. Melody Rilamala Soren of Chatra Union, Mithapukur is currently studying in the first year of Shaheed M. Mansur Ali Medical College, Sirajganj; Bithi Kujur is a first-year student of Dhaka University; Smriti Topa is the 4th year student of Begum Rokeya Government College, Rangpur; Shantana Topa is a 4th year student of Rajshahi University. Niva Bakla is studying at Vinement Nursing Institute, and Rozina Bakla is studying at Sonar Bangla Nursing Institute, Rangpur. Tama Murmu is working in Bangladesh Police in Bakram village of Rangpur Sadar. Shyamoli Murmu and Matha Kisku are assistant teachers of Kachabari village in Badarganj, Marina Hembors is studying at Lamb Nursing Institute in Parbatipur, and Mamita Mardi is studying at Thakurgaon Nursing Institute.

In addition, several indigenous women work in the beauty parlour, the garment industry, and in various labour-intensive occupations. Nonetheless, there are relatively few indigenous women in the Rangpur region who hold prominent roles in the business sector, in government, or as entrepreneurs. The head of Bakram village said that the main reasons for this are backwardness in education, prejudice, and discriminatory attitude towards women. More knowledge, education, and experience are needed to maintain this continuity. The chief of Kachabari village said that the attitude of Bengalis towards indigenous women should also be changed, and the cooperative attitude towards women should be enhanced. Besides that, to overcome these problems, indigenous women also need to be more attentive and tactful in the development of the whole of Bangladesh, so that while maintaining the norm, they can move forward by maintaining themselves in their position.

The Role of Government and NGOs

Among the sampled villages BRAC, Grameen Bank, CCDB (Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh), and World Vision are working in Anantapur village of Pirganj; RDRS, World Vision, and Caritas in Mithapukur village of Mithapukur Upazila; Several NGOs including Grameen Bank are working in Bakram village. No NGO is working in Kachabari village of Badarganj. These NGOs have set up a small number of educational institutions to provide primary education in different regions. Children who have dropped out of formal education due to distance and various problems are getting the opportunity to study through NGOs. However, women of indigenous communities can get an education in government educational institutions if they want. The NGOs have limited assistance for old allowance, minor road construction, tube well

installation, clean water provision, women's recovery, and loan provision. However, several people have recommended that NGOs assist with loan services in the majority of situations. Again, some say that it is true that NGOs work in the villages, but there is no significant support from them. The head of Kachabari village in Badarganj said the number of NGOs in the three districts of the CHT is now 140. Of these, 13 are women-headed NGOs, but the northern region is home to 1.6 million indigenous people and only two are women-headed NGOs.

On the other hand, the National Women Development Policy 2011 does not explicitly mention anything special for women and girls belonging to indigenous communities. Bangladesh's gender budget does not have a separate allocation for indigenous women. Even the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and the Special Task Force of the Prime Minister's Office does not have a special allocation for financial assistance to indigenous women in traditional economic activities and to enhance the skills of these women. Only Article 38 of the policy has to be satisfied with the promise to take extraordinary measures to improve underdeveloped indigenous communities. However, none of its implementations is seen in the case of indigenous women in the Rangpur region. Besides that, the budget set aside for indigenous peoples of the plains is not reaching the region's indigenous communities in adequate amounts. When asked what assistance they get from banks or government entities, the majority said they do not get any government assistance. They are still unaware of the government's funding allocation for indigenous communities. They borrowed from Bengali Muslims and Hindu rural moneylenders. The biggest issue for indigenous women who want to be entrepreneurs in this situation is a lack of capital. It has been suggested that if the government offers different low-interest loans, the condition may be somewhat improved.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings above, it can be said that economic problems, lack of education, lack of representation of women in power in communities, and patriarchal dominance, are the main problems of indigenous women in the Rangpur region. Besides, even after working indoors and outdoors, indigenous women are comparatively more discriminated against than Bengali women. They are deprived of the inheritance of property. Although women work in the field, no woman plays the role of village head in management or policymaking. Superstitions, blind faith, and child marriage are other obstacles for indigenous women. Similarly, being predominantly patriarchal, women belonging to indigenous communities are recognized as inferior to men in society. Women's rights and authority over the means of wealth management and production are limited, and women do not have the freedom to exercise these limited rights. However, the indigenous women of the Rangpur region are not getting significant government support. A few NGOs only support micro-credit programs for women. As well as being deprived of the free flow of information, women are unaware of various issues, including government budget allocations, initiatives, action plans, and policies. Despite their limited numbers,

women from different indigenous communities achieve success in their respective sectors.

It is the responsibility of the state and government to ensure the constitutional and civil rights, family rights, and security of all indigenous women. The state must enact and implement laws to establish the rights of indigenous women. In this case, various NGOs and civil society can fulfill the responsibility of motivating the political parties and the state. Furthermore, special measures can be taken to protect the rights of indigenous women through the constitution, if necessary, to solve their problems. In addition, it is crucial to have a budget for the self-employment of indigenous women and youth, including scholarships in higher education and technical education. Indigenous women also need to organize or build organizations or platforms to assert their rights to overcome these obstacles. Any significant change takes time, but the proper implementation lies in the existence, diversity of life, and prosperity of indigenous communities, including women.

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