

## 5. Finding a Voice for the Voiceless

Indigenous people gain recognition in Bangladesh



*Adibashi children in the pre-primary education initiative*

Despite the fact that the government has signed international agreements protecting their rights, the 2.2 million indigenous or *adibashi* peoples of Bangladesh experience structural prejudice, discrimination, and violence from the majority Bengali community. They lack power and influence at community, regional, and national levels. In response to this, Oxfam GB and its 20 partner organisations set up the Indigenous People's Capacity Building Programme. This aimed to ensure that the northern *adibashi* peoples, who are the most discriminated against, could hold the government to account. The programme increased the numbers of *adibashi* children in primary school, improved women's participation in traditional social structures, helped *adibashis* claim land, and made them less vulnerable to exploitation. This has increased the community's confidence and helped them to speak out and claim their rights.

## Introduction

Bangladesh has a total area of 143,998 square kilometres and a population of over 150 million, making it one of the most densely populated countries in the world. There are 45 different indigenous communities in Bangladesh, thought to comprise about 1.74 million people or approximately 1.2 per cent of the population (provisional census report 2001).<sup>1</sup> They are also known as *adivasi*, *adibashi*, or 'aboriginal people'. The government prefers the term 'tribals'. Levels of poverty and inequality are high. The country ranks 140<sup>th</sup> out of 177 countries in the Human Development Index,<sup>2</sup> with 41 per cent of the population living below the poverty line in 2000.

### Vulnerability of adibashis

The *adibashis* are among the poorest people in the country and live mainly by subsistence agriculture.<sup>3</sup> They have their own traditions and customs, different from those of the mainstream culture. Despite the fact that the government has signed a number of international conventions<sup>4</sup> protecting their rights, indigenous peoples have yet to receive due recognition under the constitution of Bangladesh. The most disadvantaged groups live in the north-western plains, where in 1991, it was estimated that 85 per cent were landless and only 9 per cent were literate.<sup>5</sup> They face ethnic violence and poverty.

The government of Bangladesh has no *adibashi*-centred policies, or a single department to address their development issues. They are largely deprived of state services, have limited access to government resources, and lack representation in decision-making at the local or national levels.

There is also widespread prejudice against *adibashis* by the majority Bengali population, and a belief that they are not capable of learning. As a result, they are often excluded from national education plans; there is no provision for the Bangla-based curriculum to include their different languages, and the education system does not portray a positive image of their life and culture.

In addition, landowners often bribe the local land office to produce fake papers to favour landowners who have grabbed land from the *adibashis*, who tend not to own land as individuals but have inherited it from their ancestors.<sup>6</sup>

All this is made worse by the fact that the different *adibashi* groups do not have a united voice, nor access to the information they need to claim their rights.

# The Indigenous People's Capacity Building Programme

## A rights-based approach

Since independence in 1971, the national and local non-government organisation (NGO) sector in Bangladesh has largely developed as a service-delivery sector. Many NGOs are sub-contracted by international NGOs, donors, and sometimes government, to provide essential and basic services. Very few work with minority groups from a rights perspective.

In 2000, Oxfam GB initiated what was originally called the Indigenous People's Development Programme in north-west Bangladesh, with the aim of ensuring that the northern *adibashi* peoples were aware of their rights, empowered to claim them from the government, and that they would be recognised as equal with the majority Bengali community. Initial consultations involved four workshops plus discussions with community leaders and civil-society organisations at regional and national levels. The main outcome of this first stage was a list of priority issues, including: capacity-building of organisations; land rights; education; reducing violence against women; reducing social exclusion; and sustainable livelihoods. Following on from this, it was essential to ensure that local communities and Oxfam partner organisations were willing to take a rights-based approach. The programme then developed in phases as community members gradually gained experience in identifying problems and solutions themselves, and so began leading the process.

The programme expanded significantly in 2006 with the support of DANIDA,<sup>7</sup> adding 16 partner organisations in eight additional districts. Today, the programme has evolved into the Indigenous People's Capacity Building Programme and a rights-based approach is well established. It consists of three main strands:

- 1 Building trust within communities
- 2 Building the capacity and leadership skills of women and men in grassroots organisations
- 3 Training community groups in human rights and advocacy.

The 19 partners have worked together to establish the rights of the community and create leadership; Oxfam and its partners now work only in a facilitation role.

This whole approach is breaking a trend in Bangladesh, where traditionally NGOs work in parallel with the government by providing the same services. Instead, this programme motivates *adibashi* people to claim what is theirs from the government. The programme binds the state duty-bearers (government officials) to

fulfil their obligations towards the rights-holders (indigenous communities).

Through the programme, Oxfam has developed some entry points for the *adibashi* people to feel confident as a community and to improve their awareness of their rights and how to claim them. Most importantly, the *adibashis* know that they are no longer alone and that they are supported in their struggles to find a lasting solution to their complex problems.

### **Women's participation and leadership**

Women's leadership has also been at the heart of the programme, which has aimed to give women the information, skills, and confidence to speak out about their own issues and to feel they have support in doing so. Women are no longer being ignored in the communities, as they are being included in traditionally male-dominated social structures: even though this is sometimes just as observers sitting in traditional governance forums (without decision-making powers), it is a far cry from the early days of the programme where the inclusion of women was unthinkable. As the programme develops in the future, women's leadership in decision-making processes will need to be further strengthened.

## **Pre-primary education**

Low levels of education and literacy among the *adibashi* community have contributed to their lack of understanding about what rights they have, and the means by which to access them. Accordingly, education was one of the priority areas identified during the initial discussions in 2000. The programme has particularly focused on pre-primary education as a key entry point into the mainstream school system.

Bangladesh does not have an initiative or policy to educate *adibashi* children in their mother tongue or to portray the values, cultures, and traditions of *adibashis* properly in the national textbooks. The key obstacle for *adibashis* in accessing mainstream education include language, treatment by peers and teachers, the curriculum, context of textbooks, types of instruction, and remoteness of villages. *Adibashi* children are fluent in their own languages but are often weak in Bengali, the national language.

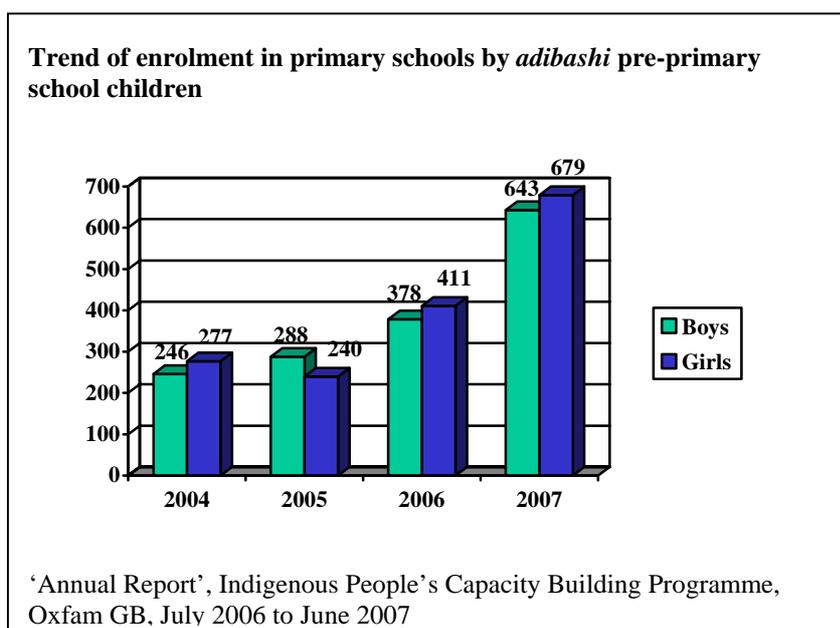
Oxfam partners brought together a group of education and programme strategy specialists along with community leaders and programme participants to plan how *adibashi* children could start to access education services. First, a one-year community-led pre-primary education programme was devised. Bilingual textbooks, sensitivity training for teachers and parents, and information sharing were tools used to assist the children. The aim was to reduce the language barrier, increase school attendance, and support the *adibashi*

children in reaching the level required to participate fully in primary school and express their needs and opinions.

Second, school principals and head teachers were brought on board at an early stage. There was initial resistance from many head teachers due to a mixture of traditional prejudice, limited information, and fear that their school ratings might drop if lower-level students were admitted. However, the partners and community organisations promoted the use of the textbooks and encouraged head teachers to visit successful community programmes. This gradually resulted in an acceptance of, and confidence in, the programme.

As a result of the programme there are now 105 community organisations, some of which are pre-primary schools, all set up to build trust, increase attendance, and increase *adibashi* children's confidence. The fact these organisations are 'community-owned' has been very important to the programme's success. Previously, *adibashi* parents did not feel willing or able to send their children to primary schools, but now almost 100 per cent of school-age *adibashi* children in some areas are enrolled in the government primary education system. The primary-school attendance rate for *adibashi* children increased from 10 per cent four years ago to its current level of 98 per cent: some 1300 children. More than half of these are girls. 'The *adibashi* students are doing better than the Bengali students in class and we are very pleased with them. We will try to give more stipends and other facilities to the promising youngsters', said Ms Kamrunnessa, Joyenpur School Principal, in 2006.<sup>8</sup>

A major success of the programme was that the government's Department of Primary Education used the model developed by the programme to produce the first training manual for the civil servants who supervise the teachers working for the inclusion of indigenous children in education.



## Working with adults

In addition, the programme established forums for the mothers of the children attending pre-primary school to come together once a month and talk about and address issues of concern. These forums are largely supported by male members of the family because they see the positive impact on the family and community as a whole. Discussions are held on various topics to do with health, hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, and encouragement to continue sending their children to school.

One issue was that the *adibashi* children were suffering from a lack of nutrition which meant they could not engage actively in education. To reduce this, the mothers' forum organised regular cooking and distribution to the children of nutritious food. To acclimatise mothers (from the forum) and children to the new atmosphere and expose them to broader horizons, exchange visits were organised with other pre-primary schools. This further encouraged both mothers and children to make new friends and discuss issues, and built the women's confidence.

The programme also works with adults and young people via the Adibashi Bikash Kendra (Adibashi Development Centre) and the Human Resources Development Centre for adult and youth learning, which involve around 30 people. These initiatives cover literacy, action to reduce social conflicts, action against discrimination, protection against eviction, solving of small-scale problems, and the promotion of cultural practices.

Most of the *adibashi* communities have their own traditional social structures, but many of these had broken down in the face of discrimination. The programme is trying to reactivate these. So far, 135 traditional structures have been set up, with 169 women involved as observer participants. They meet once a month to discuss and solve their problems. These enable the *adibashi* communities to be more organised and feel empowered to solve their own problems. They promote *adibashi* distinctive culture, heritage, and rituals by organising traditional festivals, sports, special day celebrations, and so on.

In addition, *adibashis* are working to recover land grabbed illegally by landowners, to lobby for government-owned land (*khash* – see below), to practise mediation where there is internal conflict, to ensure social justice, to share information, to overcome exclusion, and to increase interaction with mainstream Bengali society.

### **Adibashi women change male perceptions**

Traditionally, *adibashi* women do not take part in any public decision-making, either at community level or within the family. It is rare to find a female representative in traditional social structures. In Mushohar village, the women are courageous, hard-working, and dynamic, but the *Manjhi Parishad*, the local traditional social structure, consisted of all male members. As a result of being counselled by Ms Shefali, a fieldworker with Oxfam GB partner Polli Sree, the women have been encouraged to discuss their concerns with their male counterparts. At first, the men did not agree to this, but over time they agreed to reshuffle the committee. Through the facilitation of Polli Sree, the community leaders sat with prominent women in the village, who proposed three names for women members. Ms Mangle Mardi was selected as a member of the committee and her participation is gradually changing the perception of her male counterparts. She has their respect and is highlighting women's needs and issues within the community.

'Annual Report', Indigenous People's Capacity Building Programme, Oxfam GB, July 2006 to June 2007

## **Evolving into community-based organisations**

Isolation from the mainstream Bengali community makes *adibashi* people vulnerable to prejudice and violence and threatens the survival of their culture. Oxfam and its partners seek to reduce social exclusion and ensure a better quality of life and security for *adibashis* through promoting better social organisation and inter-community relationships. To this end, they provide support to establish and strengthen community-based organisations that promote indigenous culture, language, heritage, and provide security.

With the facilitation of the partner organisations, the community-based organisations have had training on areas such as writing operational guidelines, opening bank accounts, networking, and government liaison. They have gradually evolved and strengthened their capacity over the years.

To date, 105 such community-based organisations are operating with a total of 2,751 members. Of these, 1,998 are men and 753 women. They are contributing towards making a positive change within their communities in various ways such as organising cultural events and sports, and lobbying with the local government institutions, schools, and others. They are also building relationships with Bengali communities and networking with other organisations such as locally elected bodies, unions, and the local market community, with the aim of countering prejudice and discrimination.

## **Adibashi land campaign**

Shortage of land is a key cause of rural poverty in Bangladesh. The government operates a system of *khash* land, which is supposed to be allocated to poor people who don't own any land. All too often,

however, this land is actually taken by wealthy and influential local landowners in the name of the landless, with the assistance of corrupt land officials, members of the local administration, and political leaders.

The poor landless *adibashi* people of Godagari learned of a piece of *khash* land, illegally occupied by a wealthy Bengali, in the nearest village. They contacted Oxfam GB partner Adibashi Unnayan Songstha, who investigated and found that it was indeed *khash* land. They then supported the landless people in submitting an application to the local land office. They also managed to contact the local trade union, local administration, local community leaders, and other authorities.

As a result, 25 landless families from ten different villages settled on the *khash* land. At first, the illegal occupier did not want to give up his illegal possession of the land and tried to intimidate the families. He tried to knock down the newly built *adibashi* houses and to keep possession of the land by offering bribes to the different offices. But as a result of the community's efforts, he had to give up the land. At present, the families are living on the land and trying to complete the settlement process following proper legal procedures. 'We are very happy to be getting a piece of land to take shelter from our difficulties', says Parulbala, one of the people who has settled on the Godagari land.<sup>9</sup>

Reclaiming land can be a very risky process for all vulnerable groups. However, through working as community-based organisations, the *adibashi* people have information, strength in numbers, and the support of partner organisations to ensure they claim their rights.

## Preventing advance labour and crop sale

*Adibashi* labourers are often paid at a lower rate than Bengali labourers, and women are paid at a lower rate again. It is very common for *adibashi* people to sell their labour and crops in advance to make ends meet during lean periods. Advance labour is sold at lower rates, so when the harvest comes labourers have already been paid, but not at the going rate. As a result, each family loses between 30 and 50 per cent of their total wages annually. To prevent this happening, Oxfam provides soft loans to the community, motivating them to take their own initiatives to reduce their vulnerability.

So *adibashi* peoples were able to reduce their exploitation during lean periods. Now they no longer have to sell their labour and crops in advance and are more able to depend on their own resources.

### **Banking rice for a rainy day**

More than 250 *adibashi* families live in the village of Dewanpur. They are day labourers working in agriculture, where seasonal unemployment is a severe problem. At least twice a year, they become unemployed. As a result, they are compelled to take loans from non-formal sources and sell advance labour and crops at very cheap prices in order to survive. The community-based organisation Barendrabhumi Social Development Organisation (BSDO) aims to prevent this by trying to motivate the villagers to join together and save rice.

Each family saves a handful (250g) of rice a week. One person is appointed to do the accounts for each family with help from BSDO staff and Dewanpur Adibashi Sangstha, a community organisation. To date, 52 maunds (a maund is around 37kg) of rice have been collected by 94 families.

When they have no work, the families can use the rice they have saved and repay it once they have employment. The activity thus functions as a rice bank. So far, the families involved have not had to sell their labour in advance.

'Annual Report', Indigenous People's Capacity Building Programme, Oxfam GB, July 2006 to June 2007

## **Policy achievements and recommendations**

Through these programme activities, the *adibashi* people who live in the northern plains of Bangladesh have also gained access to policy makers. In some regions, they are included as active participants in development efforts undertaken by other development agencies and by government. *Adibashi* issues have been recognised in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) documents. At local level, 11 special standing committees have been formed to address and involve *adibashis* in decision-making bodies. A number of *adibashi* women and men have been included in the primary-school management committee, *khash* land-distribution committees, the security committee, and anti-corruption committees.

This programme shows how the right to be heard has begun to change the lives of the *adibashis*, giving them a voice in what happens to them. For this to continue, the following recommendations should be heeded:

- 1 Campaigning, awareness-raising, and information-sharing with mainstream communities, authorities, and decision-makers should be increased. It is essential that an enabling environment for the social and economic development of *adibashis* is created and mistrust and social barriers are reduced.
- 2 Advocacy initiatives to ensure minority groups' rights and needs should be integrated into government, donor, United Nations, NGO, and international NGO development plans and humanitarian initiatives. It is vital that issues are picked up and

addressed through existing networks, as stand-alone campaigns usually have a limited impact.

- 3 Further investment, leadership, and capacity-building of *adibashis* is required to sustain the relationship that has been built between the *adibashi* community and local government.
- 4 High-quality research and information should be maintained as this is crucial for promoting understanding of *adibashi* people and can be used very effectively with allies, the media, and key influencers.
- 5 Women's leadership in decision-making processes should continue to be strengthened.
- 6 As there is no model for development for the *adibashi* communities in Bangladesh, the success of this rights-based approach needs to be continually adapted, monitored, evaluated, and shared with others.
- 7 The learning from this programme also needs to be applied to the other vulnerable groups in Bangladesh, such as particular occupational groups and religious minorities, who constitute almost 19.8 per cent of the population (13 per cent minorities, 1.2 per cent *adibashis*, and 5 per cent occupational).<sup>10</sup>
- 8 National and international NGOs can play an advocacy role in influencing the United Nations and other donor agencies to comply with their policies and commitments to support development projects with indigenous peoples in Bangladesh.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Minority Rights International, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, [www.minorityrights.org/?lid=5636](http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=5636) (last accessed September 2008).

<sup>2</sup> UNDP, 'Bangladesh: The Human Development Index – Going Beyond Income', [http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_BGD.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_BGD.html) (last accessed September 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Oxfam GB, 'Oxfam's Work in Bangladesh in Depth: Work with Indigenous People', [www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/countries/bangladesh\\_indigenous.htm](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/countries/bangladesh_indigenous.htm) (last accessed September 2008) and Bangladesh Country Brochure (internal).

<sup>4</sup> The ILO Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention (1957), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1999), and the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (2000).

<sup>5</sup> VSO, 'Where we do it – Bangladesh', [www.vso.org.uk/about/cprofiles/bangladesh.asp](http://www.vso.org.uk/about/cprofiles/bangladesh.asp) (last accessed September 2008).

<sup>6</sup> From various newspapers: *The Daily Star* (May 2008), *New Age* (May 2008), *Adibashi Jonopother Pothe-prantore* (edited by Joyonto Acharjee (2005), *New Age* (November 2003), and *Weekly 2000* (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Danish International Development Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark.

<sup>8</sup> Oxfam (2006) internal brochure 'Being that Change in Bangladesh'.

<sup>9</sup> Oxfam GB, Indigenous People's Capacity Building Programme Brochure 2006 (internal).

<sup>10</sup> Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, [www.bbs.gov.bd](http://www.bbs.gov.bd) (last accessed September 2008); Bangladesh Adibashi Forum Report; and MJF Bangladesh, [www.mjffoundation.org](http://www.mjffoundation.org) (last accessed September 2008).

Cover photograph: Ben Beaumont/Oxfam GB 2008

© Oxfam GB, November 2008

This paper was written by Ayesha Dastgir and Bibhash Chakraborty. We would like to acknowledge the support and guidance of Heather Blackwell and assistance of Sally Field in its production. Thank you to Nikki van der Gaag who edited the paper and to Emily Laurie who provided research assistance. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues. The text may be freely used for the purposes of campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full.

For further information please email: [publish@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:publish@oxfam.org.uk)

Online ISBN 978-1-84814-060-8. This paper is part of a set **Speaking Out: How the voices of poor people are shaping the future** available for purchase from Oxfam Publishing or its agents, print ISBN 978-0-85598-638-4 for the set of 12 papers. For more information visit <http://publications.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam/display.asp?ISBN=9780855986384>

This paper is also available in French and Spanish.

## Oxfam GB

Oxfam GB is a development, relief, and campaigning organisation that works with others to find lasting solutions to poverty and suffering around the world. Oxfam GB is a member of Oxfam International.

Oxfam House  
John Smith Drive  
Cowley  
Oxford  
OX4 2JY  
Tel: +44.(0)1865.473727  
E-mail: [enquiries@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@oxfam.org.uk)  
[www.oxfam.org.uk](http://www.oxfam.org.uk)