

Marginality, Modes of insecurity and Indigenous Women of Northern Bangladesh

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Women's security is closely related with the process of their marginalization as one aggravates the other. This is particularly the case of indigenous women. They are one of the most marginalized groups in Bangladesh. Ethnicity, gender, religion, and class are the factors acting together towards their marginalization. In general, gender is a common factor for the marginalization of all women irrespective of their caste, creed, ethnicity, religious identity, and economic status. In our society, majority Bengali Muslim women are subject to gender and class discrimination, on the other hand being religious minority non-Muslim Bengali women are facing different kind of discrimination that contributes a degree more to their marginalization. However, for indigenous women the situation is worst considering the fact that along with gender, religion and economic condition, ethnic difference has added to their case to make them more marginalized. Marginalization has left the group completely vulnerable and thus exposed them to severe insecurity.

However, there is a perceived notion that indigenous women enjoy comparatively more freedom than their Bengali counterparts. The tribal social structure, absence of the system of seclusion or veil in the society, women's production related economic participation have certainly to do with women's freedom of movement and rights.

Though women's status vary within the tribal community itself according to the social system that a particular group or community belong to as some of them are matrilineal, some are patrilineal, some are christianized, some are not, the assumed freedom and rights have not guaranteed their security.

The term security is considered here in its holistic sense. Not only the mere absence of war or a narrow military concept of security is enough to encompass the multi-dimensional aspects of security at present day.¹

“Peace and security must be considered in the truest sense of the word: access to education, health, personal security and general freedom to live a life as the individual sees fit.”² In fact it is a sense of totality where security of food, social services, employment, housing, environment, access to resources, physical safety have to be ensured. A closer investigation would reveal that all of these components of security are to some extent missing or lacking in case of indigenous women in Bangladesh. Therefore, identifying the areas of insecurities can best reveal their security condition, which means where they lack security and why. The present study is aimed at so doing with particular focus on the indigenous women of north and north-western Bangladesh comprised of the districts of greater Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Dinajpur. An attempt will also be made to find out that if any social safety network prevails within the tribal community that leads their women to enjoy greater freedom. It is chiefly an empirical study based on field works carried out at different times throughout the region. I interviewed especially the members of *Santal, Oran, Pahari, Munda* and *Mahato* to get the idea of their social structures and

systems. Existing literatures and newspaper reporting have been explored in this connection to get a cross-section views to strengthen the findings.

Indigenous community of northern Bangladesh is not a homogenous unit. They are consisted of a wide range of groups, e.g. *Santals, Orans, Palias, Polia, Rajbangshi, Munda, Mahali, Mahato, Pahari, Malpahari* and so on. The general profile of these groups are that they are economically deprived; have less access to resources; are progressively loosing their lands and properties, falling victim to socio-cultural and political exploitation, discrimination and harassment, and constantly struggling for their survival and identity. Each of them has a distinct social-cultural pattern, religious traits, and inheritance system. Women's positions especially their areas of insecurities therefore vary accordingly. However, a kind of uniformity can be traced among those who converted to Christianity irrespective of their ethnic background. Moreover, patriarchal structure of the society also gives certain amount of commonality among different groups especially in respects of marriage, divorce and property inheritance systems. Though, as mentioned earlier, the concept of security has been taken here in its totality, keeping in mind the limitation of a paper, I would like to discuss the four major areas of insecurity that will cover a broader aspect. They are (i.) Constitutional insecurity (ii.) Ethnic insecurity (iii.) Economic insecurity and (iv.) Social insecurity. The major implications of the insecurities are reflected in the huge presence of physical atrocities committed against indigenous women.

Constitutional insecurity and ethnic insecurity are derived from Bengali national domination and related with indigenous peoples' ethnic origins. While economic and social insecurities have two fold sources, a greater part of which comes from outside the indigenous society due to adibasi women's vulnerability and marginality and the other part comes from within the male dominated structure of the indigenous society. Gender plays an important part in both the cases.

The Constitution and Unmaking of ethnic nationalities:

The birth of Bangladesh and the struggle for existence of the indigenous communities of the country coincided each other as the very construction of Bangladeshi nation state based on Bengali nationalism denied the existence of different ethnic nationalities from its inception. Like majority Bengalis, the liberal and secular character of the liberation war of 1971 raised high hopes among the Indigenous peoples. They actively participated in the war, but unfortunately, their hopes began to evaporate soon when the new state of Bangladesh adopted old approach of domination and discrimination towards the minorities. Bengali nationalism is one of the basic principles of the constitution of 1972, where the concept of Bengali nation has been defined as culturally and linguistically a homogenous entity and who fought unitedly in the nation's freedom struggle to bring about the independence. This unity and integrity is stated as the basis of Bengali nationalism. No where in this proposition ethnic minorities' contribution to the country's

independence struggle has been recognized.³ Equally, a kind of silence has been maintained about their distinct presence in the territory of Bangladesh. The only clause that very remotely refers to races is the Article 28(1) that— " The state shall not discriminate against any citizens on grounds of any religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth."⁴ Thus, from the beginning plurality, diversity and multi-national composition of the society were ignored in order to create Bengali hegemony. Situation worsened when religious fervor was attached in the constitution. 'Bismillahir Rahman Ur Rahim" was incorporated in the Ordinance No. 1 of 1977 undermining its secular impetus and stating the citizens of the country be called 'Bangladeshi' instead of 'Bengali.' The change was politically motivated and not to endorse non-Bengali nationalities, but only to pave the way for religious zeal. The process completed when Eighth amendment to the constitution abandoned the secular principle by making Islam the state religion on June 7, 1988, dividing the nation further religiously. Ethnic minorities suddenly found themselves as religious minority as well, as they were mostly non-Muslims. Subsection 4 of the Article 28 pays a lip service security to the non-advanced groups i.e. women and children of the society, without identifying who constitute this 'disadvanced' group and whether ethnic minorities are included there.⁵ The government of Bangladesh also declined to observe 1993 as the International year of Indigenous People proclaimed by the United Nation. It also did not ratify ILO Convention 169 where indigenous people's traditional possession and customary rights have been recognized and respective governments have been asked to protect that. Deprivation

and marginalization of indigenous peoples thus started in a very systematic manner contradicting the essence of 'independence discourse' where war was waged against Pakistani domination to establish a secular, just society with respect and recognition to all.

A sheer identity crisis of the indigenous people in general hence began with the very emergence of the country. A lack of confidence and sense of insecurity has grasped the whole community since then. It is a kind of insecurity that is imposed by the state itself and a complete violation of the international/UN/ILO laws and regulations. Recognition to indigenous peoples in the constitution would have required Govt. to take special protective measures and affirmative actions for their development as par international law. In order to avoid that along with preoccupied notion of Bengali supremacy, successive post-independent governments' showed reluctance to give the adibasis proper recognition. They are now in a no-where position, as the state does not recognize them theoretically. For that matter a situation has arisen where they are easy to be perpetrated, tortured, forcibly evicted from their lands. There exists so many cases where adibasis are killed, their lands have been grabbed, houses are looted or burnt down, animals have been taken away and ultimately they have been driven out of home and even the country as well. Police and administration are no use for them in such cases as they usually stand by to protect their 'Bengali brethren,' the prime actors of such crimes.

Presumably, when a whole community is left deliberately unprotected by the state what could be the state of security of their womenfolk. Constitutional non-

recognition has increased indigenous women's vulnerability to the extent that atrocities against them are being carried out frequently and indiscriminately in the northern districts without much hindrance. It is hard to distinguish the motives of physical atrocities carried out against adibasi women; sometimes Bengali land encroachers do it to get hold of the land they want to; sometimes it is done only because that they are *adibasi* women and therefore easy to be humiliated. Appropriate constitutional provisions certainly could improve the situation, inculcate confidence in them to stand against the odds and could intensify security measures particularly for indigenous women promulgating new laws and taking special judicial and administrative measures. Viewing importance of achieving constitutional recognition *Jatiya Adibasi Parishad*, the only spokesman organization for the *adibasis* of north Bengal based on Rajshahi, has made it central point of their demands since its onset in 1995.⁶

Ethnic identity and Violence against 'Adibasi' women:

Identification of woman's body as symbol of dignity and prestige of the community she belongs to is universal. Therefore, perpetrators use woman's body to inflict indignity upon the community in general. It frequently happens to adibasi women. There are number of examples in the areas of fieldwork, where adibasi women have been tortured, raped, abducted, harassed and humiliated simply because they are adibasis:

Case One: Ginita

The incident took place on April 24, 1997, when a twelve years old girl Ginita, the daughter of Tuda Hembrom and hailed from Panchbibi thana of Jaipurhat, went out to graze goat in the field. Ehsanul Shmeem, son of Ekramul Huq Bihari of the village of Mahipur suddenly attacked her and attempted to rape forcibly. Being attacked Ginita started to shout out in fear drawing people from nearby areas to come forward in her help. The criminal was caught right away in spot by the crowd but was immediately freed forcefully being intimidated by Aminul Islam, an UP member of Atpur Union who happened to be Shameem's uncle (mama). Moreover, he threatened the *adibasis* not to pursue the case further, otherwise they would have to face the consequence. Helpless *adibasis* then filed a case with Panchbibi thana in connection to the occurrence and for their own security (case no. 12/97, date 25.04.97). Aminul Islam kept on pressurizing the *adibasis* in various ways to withdraw the case and consequently the case had to be withdrawn eventually. The criminals, both nephew and uncle, thus got rid of the crimes of assaulting a minor girl and coercion so easily without being punished at all.⁷

Case Two: Account of Ful Pahani

In an interview in 1996, Santal woman Ful Pahani complained that “ a couple of Bangali Muslims of the village of Maheshpur-Cheragpur, thana Mahadevpur, district Naogaon picked up six *Santal* women under threat for their enjoyment.” Only two of them were recovered later but the others still missing and probably sold out for

trafficking. No police or administrative action was reportedly taken regarding the incident.⁸

Case Three: Adibasi Sabina

From a news report published in a local daily (17.7.94) it is known that a miscreant reported to be an UP member of Sasara Union, no. 5 under Kotwali thana Dinajpur being drunken entered the house of adibasi Sabina alias Mendru at about 11 p.m. at night on the day of incident (10.07.94) and tried to rape her. Chinese axe, a kind of sharpened weapon, was shown to terrify so that Sabina could not screamed out. The UP chairman was known to have taken criminal's side after the incident. Moreover, assaulted Sabina was not getting justice, instead facing threats.⁹

Two of the three examples reveal that how men in power, who are supposed to be protectors of people get involved in the process of oppression and assaulting innocent and helpless *adibasi* women. The second example is associated with severe negligence of the administration where not a minimum effort was made to recover the abducted *adibasi* girls. In all three cases criminals belong to Bengali community confirming the conviction that the Bengalis especially predominantly Muslims in association with or by getting help of or being favored by the administration embark upon such crimes.

Economic Struggle and Indigenous women's Fragility

Economic adversity and living in insecurity are synonym for indigenous women. Economic condition of

the indigenous society at large is at stake. The problem has many dimensions i.e. dispossession of *adibasi* lands, wage discrimination and limited scope for alternative earnings and economic diversification. Amongst them land problem is the most alarming and serious one. Indigenous women are particularly being targets of violent act associated with land problem. Finding alternative economic sources prove much harder for indigenous women than men. Women in general are paid less than men are; the problem of low wage is particularly acute in case of indigenous women. Indigenous women's economic insecurity has aggravated due to last two difficulties, while land problem is not only producing economic insecurity but also bringing physical harm to women. In addition to these problems, *adibasi* women are also facing discrimination within their own societies especially in respect of property inheritance system.

a) Land and women:

Agriculture is the primary means of living of indigenous peoples of North Bengal. Majority of them is traditionally farmer, though ironically a large number are now landless. Grabbing *adibasi* land has become common phenomenon in the *adibasi* inhabited areas of north Bengal. Various means and causes are involved in this process, e.g. making false *dalil* or legal documents, forcible and illegal occupation of land through violent act, adaptation of tricky measures to make fool of the innocent *adibasis* in order to get hold of their lands. Illiteracy, limited knowledge of *Bangla*, communal land ownership pattern of the society, lack of knowledge of possessing and preserving legal documents of land ownership,

paucity of procedural knowledge regarding law suit and so on are responsible in dispossession of *adibasi* lands. The process has been facilitated by non-intervention of police and administration in the matters related to harassment of the *adibasis*. Sometimes openly they take side of the offender, and sometimes do not properly implement existing laws concerning *adibasi* land ownership, sale and transfer and distribution of *khas* lands. Consequently, once who owned about 500/700 bighas of lands are now may be left with a few or no land at all.¹⁰ Therefore, at present *adibasis* are mostly agricultural laborer or day laborer. The general economic insecurity of the community derived from dispossession of land likewise tells on women's economic security. However, sometimes women become targets of land related dispute/conflict. For example—

Case One:

In July 23, 1993, Sumita Oran filed an *Ezahar* with Kaharol thana under the district of Dinajpur accusing five people named Malek, Mohammad Ali, Kasem Ali, Doulla Mohammad, and Wazed Ali for raping her minor girl Alti Rani. It is mentioned in the *ezahar* that on the 22 day of July 1993, Sumita's husband went to Dinajpur town to attend a case in the court. At night of that day the persons mentioned in the *ezahar* came to her house and asked to open the door saying that they were police and came in connection to the case her husband attending in the court. Sumita being deceived opened the door and the gang stormed in, kicked Sumita out of the room, and picked up her 14 years old girl under the threat of daggers. An investigation report submitted on 30.11.93 confirmed the

accusation against some of the peoples mentioned in the *Ezahar* as true and stated that the indicted people might have any previous conflict over land with plaintiff's husband and the crime took place in connection to that conflict. The victim was not rescued by the time the report was submitted, neither were the accused arrested.¹¹

Case Two:

In another incident of atrocity, involving land and women illustrated that a large number of *Santals* had been residing at *khas* land in the village Dalla, of Chirirbander upazila under Dinajpur district for a long time. Some influential Bangalis of the same village wanted to grab the land by any means driving the *Santals* out. Their opportunity came when the wife of one Azizul Islam fled with a *adibasi* young man deserting her Bangali husband. Even though Azizul himself took the incident normally citing it as a consequence of poverty and his inability to feed his wife, the opportunists land grabbers found it as an excuse to mount pressure on the resident *Santals*. In a salish meeting arranged by them *santals* were ordered to find out Azizul's wife immediately. Not only that at the very night of salish meeting, hired miscreants attacked the Santal village, set it on fire and beat the villagers up severely, destroyed households goods, food and grains. The worst was that they even targeted to children and especially women. The women were stripped off their blouses and saris, and physically assaulted. The poor villagers, both Hindus and Muslims, of the nearby village put out the fire later. Police did come to investigate but allegedly supported the *Bangali* intruders and perpetrators. *Santals* of the village then appealed to UP

chairman for justice and rallied to Dinajpur town to protest the incident. Nevertheless, as usually administration kept silence and no action was reportedly taken almost a month after the incident.¹²

Case Three:

The much publicized and sensitive case of killing Alfred Soren on 18.08.2000 occurred in the context of land conflict leading to indiscriminate torture against women, children and elderly people. It is known that approximately 10 to 12 adibasi families were living in Bhimpur village of Naogaon (Mouza: Bhimpur, dag no. 166&168). The masterminds of the occurrence, Hatem Ali and his associate Gadai Laskar together with some hired terrorists (100 to 150) in a bid to occupy adibasi land raided the adibasi families which lasted for about three hours from 11a.m. to 2 p.m. They burnt down all the houses, indiscriminately beat up men, women and children. At one point, Pansiri, the sister in law of Alfred was kicked in abdomen so heavily that she suffered loss of pregnancy. The barbarity at last ended up with the murder of Alfred Soren and 30 to 35 wounded. Surprisingly enough, the nearest police station was only one or one and half mile away from the place of occurrence but the carnage took place without any intervention from the law and order enforcement agency, though local people informed them. It is alleged that the criminals had made an illegal alliance with local S.P. to keep the police inactive during the carnage. However, the incident evoked serious grievances among the indigenous peoples throughout the country and they burst into

protests demanding exemplary punishment to the criminals.¹³

Equating woman's body with possession and occupation of land thus only increase indigenous women's vulnerability and insecurity to the degree that is unknown to majority Bengali Muslim women. Numerical superiority and Bengali national identity act as protect shield even for the poorest section of Bangladeshi Muslim women which indigenous women severely lack.

b) Labor Market Discrimination:

Generally, indigenous laborers and agricultural workers (*khetmajur*) of greater north-Bengal get paid less than Bangali laborer. Women *adibasi* laborers get lesser even than their male counterparts. It is found that when a Bangali *khetmajur* gets 25 Tk. per day, a *adibasi khetmajur* gets only 15 to 20 Tk. for the same work and *adibasi* women *khetmajur* gets only 5 to 7 Tk.. Sometimes they are paid in kind instead of cash for certain kind of contractual jobs. In that case, according to contract *adibasi* women get almost half of the amount of that the *adibasi* men get. For example, if *adibasi* men get one maund of rice, *adibasi* women get only half a *maund*.¹⁴ Khristina Biswas, an *adibasi* women activist, informed us that inequality of payment is pervasive in the *Barind* area than her area of Mohipur, adjacent to Rajshahi city where they waged a struggle under her leadership for equal payment. Women workers stopped working unless the landlords agreed to pay them same as the men workers. Since women are sincere, regular and easy to dominate, landlords usually prefer women

workers most to get better output. Therefore, being compelled they agreed with the demand of Khristina and her associates.¹⁵ Now it has become the rule of the area, whereas other areas of greater Rajshahi, Dinajpur are still suffering from wage discrimination as usually. According to a survey carried out in the districts of Rajshahi, Natore and Naogaon in 1996-97, 69.1% *adibasi* women opined that they get paid less than men.¹⁶ Rashmi Mahato from Nachole asserted that in Barind areas women get paid Tk.30/35, when men get Tk. 45/50.¹⁷

Indigenous women face work and wage related discriminations in various other ways. Often their payments are delayed for indefinite period, and if ask the dues they are treated badly, face physical harassment. Sometimes their payments are denied completely or partially. Mongo Rani of the village of Mominpur, district Natore alleged, “ Bangalis of the area hang on payment for years. After work, they offer bad proposal.”¹⁸ Minati Rani from the same village informed that sometimes for five days of work the owner or employer pays for only three days denying the rest or saying the rest will be paid later ultimately ends up without paying. Abina Hembrom complained that employers also pay less than the amount *adibasi* women contracted for. For example, may be someone has contracted for 25 Tk. per day but at the end of the day she was paid only 20/15 or 12 Tk.. Kajoli Murmu of Shibpur reiterated the complain— “ Bangalis employ us promising higher pay, but after work do not pay, rather harass us.” Malti kisku, Beli Bhakta, Chintamoni Tiraki moaned that they were not properly paid. It is complained that indigenous women are preferred to be hired as laborer as they are

easy to be exploited and considered as cheap labor in the labor market.¹⁹ The evidences are enough to suggest that lack of proper payment and harassment related with the process increase indigenous women's insecurity.

Option for otherwise income as alternative is not very available to *adibasi* women. Men can work as rickshaw puller or van *chhalak*; they can go out of the village to work as *kuli*, factory workers in the town, or run a small tea shop/trade on their own in/nearby the village. Household duties, social taboos and financial constraint usually do not permit women to go for such options. However, now a day some Non government Organizations (Caritas, Brack, Grameen Bank) are working in the *adibasi* inhabited areas of North Bengal providing *adibasi* women with micro-credit facility. To some extent, this credit facility helps *adibasi nari* generate some extra-income through gardening, cattle raising, poultry farming and the like. Nonetheless, the facility is not enough to depend solely on the income generated through it. Moreover, the already revealed loopholes of micro-credit have made the system rather burdensome than help to many people. Some indigenous women especially those who are trained up by church or NGOs have engaged themselves in handicraft works and production like weaving, bamboo works etc. However, this is yet to develop as alternative income source. It can rather be termed as income support activity as the number of women involved in and scopes of such works is still very limited. The high rate of illiteracy among *adibasi* women has made their entry to skilled, professional jobs almost impossible. Consequently, despite extensive work force participation *adibasi* women's economic condition

remain deplorable. Moreover, insecurities associated with economic activity increase their vulnerability.

Indigenous Social Structure and Security of Women

Social life of the indigenous peoples primarily centers around community life. However, with the advent of Christianity the traditional way of life has been undermined to some extent. Christian and non-Christian (known as traditionalist or *Sanatani*) have developed distinct life style on their own. However, Christianity has to some extent brought uniformity of beliefs and practices among divergent ethnic groups who have become Christian. Despite, there are areas of commonalities between the Christian and *Sanatanis*.

Like the Bengalis, indigenous society of north Bengal is patrilineal. Nevertheless, adibasi women's economic independence has given them a kind of self-reliance and more valued position in the society. *Adibasis* are agricultural community and work participation is shared by both sexes, often more by the women. Respondents of the interviews carried out separately among the members of *Santal, Pahari, Oran, and Mahato, Munda* communities unanimously admitted that their womenfolk work more than that of men. Alongside men, women take part in most of agricultural works including sowing, weeding, reaping, and threshing. Sometimes, they also take part in marketing of grains and vegetables.²⁰ "It not only provides the basic economic security but (also).. provides recognition to her individuality and from which she draws socio-economic and psychological security."²¹ Only ploughing, which is a

social taboo for women, is considered as men's job. Besides, works like collecting and gathering forest produce, firewood are also done by women to supplement family income. Moreover, all kind of household works ranging from child bearing, rearing, cooking, cleaning, washing to holding together family and community life are in the purview of women's affair. It enables women to play an important part in the decision making process of the family. Most of the interviewees admitted that women are consulted in taking family decisions.²²

Unlike Bengali society, the notion of 'public' and 'private' sphere is rather blurred in the tribal society. Women are free to move, as they like; separation of spheres of work and movement between men and women is generally absent there. There is no system of seclusion, moreover free mixing is allowed. Social value system is strong against harassment of women. During festivities and ceremonies, *adibasi* men-women dance, drink together throughout the whole night without ensuing any untoward incidents. Referring to *Jhumur* dance, a traditional tribal dance festival, Bijoy Pahan of Munda community said, "we, men-women dance and drink together throughout the whole night but no men even being drunken could ever think of touching other women. We always maintain 'hush' not to do anything unethical."²³ This 'hush' or a built-in ethical value is considered as the strength of the society to protect women from unwanted aggravation. *Adibasi* girl has been harassed by *adibasi* boy is a rare incident. And there exists strict social sanction against its violation usually in the form of fine in cash as decided by the village *Mandal* in consultation with the members of the village.²⁴

Prohibition of marriage in the same *gotra* (family name) has provided a unique social security network for women. According to this system same titleholder group consider themselves brother and sister and therefore can not marry each other. For example, a *Santali* man with family name *Hembrom* can not marry a *Hembrom*- girl. The system is prevalent among almost all other *adibasi* groups and debar man not to desire a girl from the same *gotra* putting resistance against harassment of women. Interviewees informed that the rule strictly exists in the *adibasi* society and violation does not occur usually.²⁵

Dowry, another yardstick of socioeconomic security, is not paid during marriage transaction of the *Santals*, *Paharis* and *Mundas*. Marriage system varies substantially between Christians and non-Christians *sanatanis*. It is known that dowry was in vogue among *Sanatani adibasis* but used to be paid in a reversal way that the Bengalis do, which means bridegroom used to pay for his bride during marriage. Since most of the *adibasi* families can not afford to pay for bride at present because of declining economic condition, the system exists but only in a titular form. Token money like Tk.12 among *Santali* Christian, Tk. 60 among *Sanatani Santals*; Tk. 22.50 among *Paharis* and Tk. 60/65 among *Mundas* are paid. The amount was decided long ago considering the economic condition and value of money of that time, but remain unaltered as the general economic condition of the *adibasis* has been fallen.²⁶ The system exemplifies the valued position of a girl even within the patriarchal structure of the society. Honor and importance attached to women's position in a sense ensure their social safety and security. Previously this was also the case of *Mahatos*

when bridegroom used to pay Tk.150/200 as 'pan' and also clothing for the relatives of the bride in addition. But things have changed in the recent days seemingly being influenced by the trend of the mainstream 'Bengali' society. Dowry has appeared as a new social evil for the *Mahatos* in the last two decades. Rashmi Mahato informed that she was married in 1974 and her family had not to pay dowry. But now the 'demand' has gone up as high as taka 20,000/ 25,000.²⁷ On the other hand, the *Orans* are in general adhering to traditional animistic faith and to a great extent practice popular form of Hindu rituals. Accordingly, a rigid system of dowry prevalent amid them. The bride's family is to pay the bridegroom a heavy amount of dowry in both cash and kind according to the demand. It appears as a tremendous burden for the girl's family making marring off a girl a harder task and hence revulsion towards the birth of a girl occurs.²⁸ Thus, 'birth becomes a curse' for a girl born in an *Oran* or *Mahato* family.

Despite the fact that women have more social and economic values in the *adibasi* societies of North Bengal, women's work participation has not been translated in making women's position higher in proportion in the society. Theirs is a male dominated society; they reckon descent from father's side. Child preference still inclines to boys even though women work hard than men do. Systems of property inheritances though vary between the communities, but in most cases son inherits father's property. A study shows that among *Santals*, *Orans*, and *Mundas* (both *Sanatani* and Christian) sons get father's property after his death. Daughters' share absolutely depends on parents' good will that whether she should be

given or not. If father wants to give his daughter a share, he will have to do it by making will or legal document, otherwise after his death son will inherit the entire property by law. Any verbal commitment or agreement from the part of the father will not be enough to ensure his daughter's share after his death. 'Usually fathers' do prefer sons to inherit property,' said most of the respondents. In such cases if there is no son, only daughters, nephews will inherit uncle's property, but not the daughters.²⁹ The *Paharis* are exception here. Among them girls are not fully deprived of their fathers' property. Approximately 1/3 of the property is given to them and if father died before settlement, sons and daughters will mutually decide the amount of share.³⁰ Mother's ornaments are usually distributed among daughter-in-laws, but if wishes she may give her daughters a part of it. It is only among the *Mahatos* where girls inherit mothers' property as par law. Even if mother deliberately gives it her son by making will, daughters will have 'right' or '*haq*' to challenge it and the '*adibasi samaj*' will consider her '*haq*.'³¹ The practice of property inheritance of the indigenous peoples though not guided by very structured and organized legal codes, women are thus generally deprived. A sense of severe economic insecurity consequently derives out of this social system, ironically though women are the prime economic contributors of the families' income. It is also assumed from the practices of inheritance that sons get preference over daughters when it comes to the question of material benefit.

Addiction to liquor/ alcohol is one of the most serious social problems of the *adibasis* of North Bengal. Drinking is a part of their culture, but it has become so

pervasive especially among the males that it is telling on their working capacity, education, social responsibility and sensitivity. A study shows that out of 110 *adibasis*, 85 (77.3%) are addicted to drinking.³² The worst manifestation of the habit of drinking alcohol of *adibasi* males occurs through beating wives and thereby destroying peace and harmony in the family life inflicting physical and mental indignity upon women. Addiction is the principal cause of torture against women— informed Mula Rani (Janglipar, Maheshpur, Naogaon). She added that being addicted men do not go to work, stay home, but if women can not go to work for any reason for one or two days they beat them up.³³ Obviously, drunken men are more prone to wife beating. Sense of family and economic responsibility declines with the increasing trend of drinking imposing indirectly the family burden solely on women.

Divorce is not permitted in the traditional system of the *adibasi* society; and interestingly enough, conversion to Christianity has not brought about any fundamental changes in the system so far. The popular term '*chharan*' occurs very rarely as a substitute of official divorce from the part of both husband and wife. No economic reparation is involved in such cases, even if husband initiates the '*chharan*,' wife does not get any compensation for her contribution to husband's family so long.' The worst happens, when mother is denied of the right of her children in such cases. Even minor children are supposed to remain in father's custody by customary law.³⁴ Thus, serious deprivation of the fundamental rights of women occurs by prevailing custom and tradition of

the indigenous society. The multi-faceted forms of insecurity of tribal women again enhance this way.

Proper education can give women a kind of strength and security economically and socially. Unfortunately, general educational condition among the *adibasis* of northern Bengal is extremely deplorable, let alone the education of women. According to the Census report of 1991, only 20.5% male *adibasi* are literate and women are literate only 7.41%.³⁵ However, thrust for education is increasing day by day and field study shows that girls are also being encouraged to go school these days, though usually sons get preference for education.

Though as mentioned earlier, the notion of ‘public’ and ‘private’ sphere does not exist very strictly in the indigenous society of North-Bengal, politics is still perceived as male domain. The smallest political unit of *adibasi* villages is ‘*gram samaj*,’ a traditional agency of exercising control over the villages. Every *adibasi* village is a kind of independent political unit. The head of the village is called *Mandal* or village headman elected through votes of the members of the village. Women are not usually supposed to participate in such election.³⁶ While carrying out the fieldwork, we have not heard of any female *Mandal* across the districts of greater North-Bengal. Being asked why is it so— a male member of the *Paharia* community of Baganbari, Rajshahi Sadar, replied that women are weak, vulnerable, and therefore can not face the hardship of politics and stand against the odds of political world.³⁷ Christina Biswas, a well-known woman activist differed with the notion that women are not able to participate in politics. In fact, hers is the best example of women’s empowerment in terms of political and

organizational skill. She is actively involved in the politics and organizational activities of '*Adibasi Parishad*' of Rajshahi. She has taken part in many demonstrations, helped organize many rallies and assemblies, and very much vocal on the issues of indigenous peoples' rights, and women's rights. On top of all, she is extremely courageous, hardworking motivating and capable of administering the village more than any man does. We came to know that the elders of her village (Baganbari) once approached her to participate in '*mandal*' election. However, her reformatory program especially the banning of alcohol drinking displeased the male members of the village and later on she decided not to take part in the election.³⁸ Another interviewee, Rashmi Mahato from Nachole of the district of Chapai Nawabganj is an UP member. She was elected competing with other Bangali males from a predominantly indigenous peoples inhabited constituency and now reportedly performing well in her job. In total almost 12 *adibasi* women were elected member in the UP election of 1998.³⁹ Why women do not usually participate in '*mandal*' election when they are capable of performing duties as UP member like her— being asked of such question, Rashmi Mahato referred to traditional practice which generally discourages women's participation in politics.⁴⁰

“Ethical values of the adibasis are being contaminated in association with dishonest *Bangalis*,” one respondent decried. Consequently, women's insecurity and vulnerability are increasing within the society itself. The evidence of Shusila Lakra corroborates this statement. The case was as the following:

The Case of Jalita and Shusila:

Shusila, an outspoken Pahari woman, was the chairperson of a woman organization ‘*Nari Mukti Sangsad*,’ initiated by a local church based on Paris. Shusila and her organization were fighting for the cause of an *adibasi* woman named Jalita Marandi. Jalita was married for 10 years and a mother of two daughters and one son. Her husband Louis Marandi, a fourth class employee of a local hospital, married another woman dumping Jalita and her children. It is known that from the very beginning of their married life Louis used to torture Jalita. Since Jalita, an illiterate housewife, was without any means to support herself and the kids, being helpless put up with the rude behavior of Louis for a long time. However, at one point Louis drove her out of the house and married second time, though it was not permitted in social and religious laws. Finding no other way, Jalita came to Shusila and her husband, who was the elected *mandal* of the village, for justice. The *mandal* then summoned a ‘*salish*’ meeting to settle the issue. Unfortunately, no fruitful outcome availed at ‘*salish*,’ rather bitterness aggravated. Then Shusila and her organization took up the issue, as it was a case of torture against women. In Shusila’s own words, “if such things let happen without any protest many women will be victim like Jalita in future.” She said, “ if we could resist (*shashon*) one, others will get lesson and will be prevented from doing so.” When Shusila and her group started campaign to create public opinion in favor of Jalita and sought help of the Church to mediate, then Louis and his gang started threatening them. How initiatives of the Church also failed in vain as Louis and his associate were

stubborn enough not to come to any compromise. At this point, Jalita demanded her valuables that she brought from her parents' house during marriage and asked '*bharan-poshan*' for her children for breaking the marriage. Louis continually denied coming to a compromise. Then, being advised by the church Jalita's family took refuge to legal procedure (in November 2000) and filed a case against Louis claiming his second marriage illegal. Following the case, Louis was arrested and stayed in Jail for two months. After coming out of the jail, he started threatening violently Jalita, Shusila and other member of the woman's organization, abused them verbally, harassed in different on ways in order to put pressure to withdraw the case. Even *mastans* were sent to Shusila's house to terrify her not to move further with the issue. However, being failed to get the case withdrawn Louis and his gang started politicking within the village. Violating existing norms and practices, they denounced the authority of Shusila's husband and a new '*mandal*' was elected. Thus, the village was divided and many women being pressurized by the gang of Louis showed reluctance to go further with the case at least overtly. Therefore, Shusila and one or two of her close associates were left alone to fight for the cause and their families were announced kind of '*ekghore*,' and thereby compelled to lead a deserted life. Despite all the suffering, Shusila is yet to give in Louis's demand but found extremely upset by the event and broke into tears during the interview while describing how miserable lives she and her associates were living. They were in a constant threat and pressure.⁴¹

The tale of Shusila and Jalita reveals the trend of moral degradation in the *adibasi* society and the vulnerability of women there. Illegal action like the one Louis committed is getting upper hand in the society, where women's rights and security are being incapacitated.

Conclusion:

“All women are in a sense subaltern in a male dominated society.”⁴² Ethnic identity of indigenous women become especially conspicuous when interaction with the state and mainstream society is considered. The biased, hegemonic, majoritarian approach of the ruling elites and the partial nature of the constitutional provisions of the Bangladeshi nation state has divided the society between the dominant and marginalized one. Thus, dominant Bengali national prejudice works to detriment, suppresses others' national identity, and creates 'otherness' in the society. Indigenous women's position is at the bottom of the marginalized group.

Marginality creates a sense of severe insecurity generally among all indigenous peoples. Following the model of oppression used by the Gertrud Baer International Women's Seminar (held in August 3-6, 1993, Swetzerland) on “Overcoming Racism— Living Together,” we could use a simplified version of a similar model of discrimination to demonstrate how social mechanism of ethnic discrimination works:⁴³

Ideology of (national and religious) Superiority + Power (institutionalized)= (Militant national/ racial) ism
→shapes→ Attitude + Power (personal)= Discrimination.

The model shows how ideology of superiority (here it is national and religious superiority) coupled with institutional power (here it is state) results in *ugra* (militant) nationalism, which in turn shapes one's attitude, which combined with power help make discriminatory decisions at a personal level.

Obviously, indigenous women are more insecure in this context as they are the 'others' in the society; moreover, they are women and poor. Land and labor market problems has caused women's displacement, physical insecurity and intensified their economic hardship. "Feminization of poverty" is no less visible in the tribal society. It is known from the interview that in Barind areas of greater Rajshahi, women are not at all hired as day laborer during the off-season (from Ashwin/Kartik to Magh).⁴⁴ Property inheritance system of the indigenous society is an another indicator of economic deprivation where women's rights have been largely overlooked. Patriarchy within and without the tribal society hence brings economic insecurity for *adibasi* women. Nonetheless, some in-built safety network within the tribal society based on traditional value system and women's production relations counter balance the gross discrimination and assure some kind of security in their own society. At the same time, it also reveals an inherent dichotomy of the indigenous it comes to the question of social system, where women are independent and honored and at a time deprived and down-looked as well. The state of security of women therefore in a dilemma there.

Unfolding the modes of insecurity of indigenous women, the foregoing discussion helps us suggest some crucial security measures:

a) Constitutional recognition to ethnic minorities will reduce their marginality, vulnerability and help bring an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect and security.

b) Special protective measures have to be taken to ensure indigenous peoples economic and social rights.

c) Any forms of violence and oppression against indigenous women have to be dealt with strict legal and administrative actions. Police and administration will have to show 'pro' adibasi attitude transcending national and religious bias and act impartially.

d) Reforms should be undertaken within the adibasi society itself to nullify gender-discriminatory practices. And measures need to be taken to protect and upheld the values, which honor and respect women.

e) Indigenous women's production related activities have to be highlighted in order to earn them an equal status in the society.

f) Indigenous women has to be imparted with adequate educational facilities.

Endnotes:

¹ The Report of the seminar on “ International Security: A feminist perspective for the future,” held on 15 February, 1995, Switzerland, 3.

² Ibid, 1.

³ *The Constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh*, Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1972, 5.

⁴ Sohana Khondokar, “Santals the oppressed Indigenous”, *The Daily Star*, 16.04.2000.

⁵ Amena Mohsin, *Politics of Nationalism in Bangladesh*, UPL, 1997, 6.

⁶ See nine points demand raised by Rajshahi Adibasi Parishad, 1995.

⁷ Interview with Rabirdranath Soren, a leader of the Rajshahi Adibasi Parishad, 1998.

⁸ Interview with Ful Pahani, 1996.

⁹ *Daily Tista*, 17.07.94.

¹⁰ Interview with adibasi leader Biswanath Singh and Budhla Oran, Dinajpur, 1994.

¹¹ See, Ezahar filed by Sumita Oran with Kaharol Thana, Dinajpur, 23.07.93.

¹² *Daily Sangbad*, 08.05.90.

¹³ See, “An appeal to Prime minister,” made by Promode Mankin, ex-MP, Netrokona, 30.08.2000 and Interview with Rabindra Nath Soren, May 2001.

15. Interview with Kristina Biswas, Rahshahi, 31.10. 2001.

16. Mesbah Kamal, Eshani Chakraborty, Jobaida Nasreen, *ibid*, 137.

17. Interview with Rashmi Mahato, 31.10.01, Rahshahi.

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18. Statement of Mongo Rani, Mominpur, Natore, given at a Public Hearing session at Rajshahi in 1996.

19. Accusations of Minati, Abina Hembrom, Malti Kisku, Beli Bhakta, Chintamoni Tirki and the like made at a Public Hearing session at Rajshahi in 1996.

20. Interview with Lusua Marandi, Basanti Murmu, Kristina Biswas, Mita Biswas, Raghu Biswas, Surya Biswas, Bijoy Pahan, Rashmi Mahato and the like, 30.11.01 and 31.11.01.

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21. Latika Menon, *Gender Issues and Social Dynamic*, New Delhi, 241-242.
 22. Both male and female interviewees (Lusia Marandi, Basanti Murmu, Kristina Biswas, Mita Biswas, Raghu Biswas, Surya Biswas, Bijoy Pahan, Rashmi Mahato and the like) admitted that.
 23. Interview with Bijoy Pahan, 31.11.01.
 24. Do.
 25. Interview with Lusia Marandi, 30.11.01.
 26. Interview with Lusia Marandi, Kristina Biswas, Bijoy Pahan, 30.11.01 and 31.11.01.
 27. Interview with Rashmi Mahato, 31.11.01.
 28. Interview with the members of Oran community, i.e. Satish Oran, Jitesh Oran, Fulbati Oran, Aghni Oran etc., 31.11.01

 29. Interview with the members of Santal, Pahari and Oran communities, 30.11.01.&31.11.01.
 30. Interview with the members of the Paharis, 31.11.01.
 31. Interview with Rashmi Mahato, 31.11.01.
 32. Mesbah Kamal, Eshani Chakraborty, Jobaida Nasreen, *ibid*, 129.
 33. Interview with Mula Ranim, 1996.
 34. The members of Santal, Pahari, Munda, Mahato and Oran communities gave the same statement.
 35. Eshani Chakraborty, "Problems and Resistance of the Indigenous Peoples: Case Study Dinajpur," Dr. Sharif Uddin Ahmed (ed.), *Dinajpur: History and Heritage*, Bangladesh Historical Association, 1996.
 36. Known from the interviewees of the members of Santal, Pahari, Munda, Mahato and Oran communities
 37. Interview with Surya Biswas, 31.11.01.
 38. Interview with Kristina Biswas, 31.11.01.

 39. Mesbah Kamal, Eshani Chakraborty, Jobaida Nasreen, *ibid*, 141.
 40. Interview with Rashmi Mahato, 31.11.01.
 41. Interview with Shusila Lakra, 31.11.01.
 42. Gautam Bhadra & Partha Chattapaddhaya (eds.), *Nimnabarger Itihas*, Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 1999, 20.

43. Report of the Gertrud Baer International Women's Seminar on "Overcoming Racism— Living Together," held in August 3-6, 1993, Swtzerland, 4.

⁴⁴44. Interview with Rashmi Mahato, 31.11.01.