

National Seminar on “ Sankskriti Jokhon Jibika, Sankskriti Jokhon Lorai ” (When Culture is Livelihood, When Culture is Struggle)

A national seminar titled “Sankskriti Jokhon Jibika, Sankskriti Jokhon Lorai” (When Culture is Livelihood, When Culture is Struggle) was held on 13-14 August 2007 at the CIRDAP Auditorium and jointly organised by Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB) and Bangladesh Adivashi Forum.

Dr. Shamsul Bari, Chairman RIB in his introductory speech informed the house that Research Initiatives, Bangladesh from its inception emphasised on extending research support for the marginalised communities in Bangladesh that also include indigenous communities of the plane land and Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs).

RIB has been trying to disseminate the findings of these researches among the potential organisations and individuals including the policy-level officials of the Government and concerned agencies for adopting positive attitude and programmes towards social and economic upliftment of the indigenous communities of the country. With this core objective, the seminar was organised with joint collaboration of RIB and Bangladesh Adivashi Forum.

Culture of every community is developed and enriched through positive changes of basic components of the livelihood patterns of that community. This means that economic base is the main structure on which culture of a society largely depends on. Findings of RIB supported researches clearly demonstrated that the age-old livelihoods and professions of most of the indigenous communities are at the verge of extinction thus posing a great threat both to the livelihoods and culture of these communities. On the other hand, in some communities (e.g. Monipuri community), livelihood pattern is largely influenced by and centred on their culture. When the components of a particular culture are subjected to attack and gradually lost its basic entities, vigour and eventually fallen into severe crises, it also affects the livelihood patterns of the concerned community. And these are the bases for framing the title of the seminar “Sankskriti Jokhon Jibika, Sankskriti Jokhon Lorai”.

Singing Adivashi Songs by Seminar Participants

Adivashi cultures are still considered as rich. But their occupations are now subjected to extinction due to policy impacts and competition from low-cost synthetic/modern products. Members of the indigenous communities like Garo , Santal , Buno , and Munda are being constantly displaced from their main professions thus becoming prone to the povertisation process. On the other hand, cultural settings of the various indigenous communities of the CHTs that are based on ‘Jum’ cultivation, also termed as ‘Jum culture’ is now being branded as an obstacle for higher agricultural productivity. This approach of development is displacing the members of the indigenous communities from their own ways of lives.

RIB through its research and documentation of the major components of these rich cultures is trying to diffuse among the members of the young generations in collaboration with different

Forums/organisations. The other objective is to bring positive changes at the policy levels towards preservation of these cultures. On day-1, the first session of the seminar was presided over by Mr. Taslimur Rahman, Executive Director BLAST. Researchers of RIB included Hiren Das, Ananda Mohon Sinha and Ashoke Kumar Ghosh presented their research findings on culture and livelihood struggles of the Santal, Monipuri and aoro communities respectively. Main discussants were anthropologist Rahnuma Ahmed and indigenous leader Rabindranath Saren. Ms. Selina Hossain, RIB Board member and a noted novelist presided over the second session of the day. Syeda Habiba and Merina Juthi presented their Gono Gabeshona findings on Buno and Munda communities respectively. Sanjeeb Drong, another researcher presented his paper on reflection of the indigenous communities in the Text Books of Schools. Main discussants were development worker Kirti Nishan Chakma and Professor Meshba Kamal.

Dr. Hameeda Hossain, Vice Chairperson RIB Presiding Over the Session 'Culture as Livelihood'

The first session of the day-2 was presided over by Dr. Hameeda Hossain. Research paper on natural colour for chakma cloths was presented by Zobaida Nasrin in absence of the researcher Kabita Chakma. Dipayan Khisa and An Suching Marma presented their research findings on the evolution of jum cultivation and handicrafts of Bom communities respectively. Discussant was Sudatta Bikash Tanchangya, a noted Adivasi literary figure. The second session of the day was presided over by Professor Amena Mohsin. Protikar Chakma presented his paper on traditional laws of CHTs and a documentary film on Khumi community made by Suvashish Chakma screened before the audience. Raja Devasish Roy was the main discussant in the session. The day's activities were followed by cultural performances displayed by the artists from the Chakma, Tripura and Marma communities. In all the sessions there were open discussions where large number of participants took part.

Seminar on Rickshaw Pullers in Dhaka

On the 8th January, a dissemination seminar was held in Cirdap Auditorium to understand about the plights of rickshaw pullers in the city. The event was hosted by RIB in conjunction with Niti Gobeshona Kendro. Shamsul Bari, Chairman of RIB, chaired the seminar along with researcher team including Sheikh Towfiq, principal researcher of the project.

Titled Rickshaw Eviction from the Main Roads of Dhaka City: Impact on the Lives and Livelihoods of the Rickshaw Pullers and Search for Redress, the project involved three areas of the city, namely Mirpur, Mohammadpur and Khilgaon. The researchers discussed various issues with rickshaw pullers and their families about their work and lives. The primary objectives of the project were to find occupational hazards surrounding the profession, which were identified as laws limiting the use of rickshaws in the city, lack of job security and vulnerability to theft and damage, as well as the physically demanding nature of the work.

The seminar also highlighted the fact that most rickshaw pullers don't see any serious long-term problems since as long as they can physically work, they will always find some sort of job. However, they do want their constitutional acknowledgement as day laborers, along with the monetary and rights based benefits that come out of it.

Speakers at the seminar stressed the need to find alternative sources of income for rickshaw pullers, including the potential of microcredit in such a profession. International donor agencies must also be held accountable for the help they have promised regarding loans and finding alternative solutions to rickshaw pulling. Members of the Rickshaw pullers' community were also present and spoke graphically of their miserable conditions.

PAR Retreat

On the 23rd of February, a retreat was held in Shatkira to discuss and share the evolution of participatory action research (PAR) in development research throughout the country. Present were PAR researchers from all over the country, as well as RIB board members and staff. Paritran, a local RIB partner, helped with the logistics and provided valuable contributions in the discussions.

Topics of discussions included the chief obstacles and challenges facing PAR and how they have been locally resolved, and the sustainability of PAR within local communities without any outside intervention. Mr. Milon Dash, Executive Director of Paritran, arranged for field visits for participants to get a better understanding of PAR at the field level. Participants were also entertained and educated by a variety of local cultural programs including local level interactive theatre.

Final Presentations:

The following final presentations have been made within the last six months.

Number	Name of Project	Researcher	Date
1	Perpetuation of Dowry as a Social Practice in Bangladesh	Dr. Nasrin Khondokar	December 17th, 2005.
2	Strategies of Low Income Groups for Promoting a Better Standard and Living for the Next Generation	Kazi Sameeo Sheesh	19th Jan, 2006
3	Poverty, Development of the Santal Community	Md. Atiqur Rahman	3rd January, 2006
4	Improving the Quality of Life of the Santal Community	Hiren Dash	8th January, 2006
5	Technology Development for Making Sand-Based Bricks (Blocks) for Employment and Empowerment of Sand Workers	Mr. Abu Syed Ahmed	18th January, 2006
6	Investigation of Diagnostic Method to Detect Lymphatic Filariasis	Dr. Apala Farhat Naved	5th February, 2006
7	Towel (Gamcha): The Weavers and Weaving	Mr. Shaheed Hossain Shamim	7th February, 2006
8	Mapping and Analysis of the Gaps in Local Government	Ms. Aroma Dutta	13th March, 2006
9	Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Agriculture	Dijen Mollick	6th March
10	Influence of Organizational Culture on Health Providers for Poor People	Sanjita Farhana	9th March

Meeting with the RIB researchers and the Delegates from the Dutch Embassy

A meeting with most of the researchers who are conducting research with RIB support or have completed so was organized on January 29, 2004. This was the second time that most of the researchers getting support from RIB had the opportunity of information to meet share and listen to one another's project. However, it was the first occasion when representatives from Dutch Embassy and other donor organisations were invited and had the opportunity to interact with the researchers who are doing research with RIB support. Mr. Jaap van der Zeeuw, Deputy Head of Mission, Mr. Cornelius Hacking, First Secretary (Education) of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Mr. Gerard Hendriksen from DFID attended the meeting. Dr. Shamsul Bari, Chairman RIB briefed the objectives and activities of RIB before the representatives of Dutch Embassy, DFID representative and researchers. Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Executive Director RIB introduced the researchers and their research objectives before the Embassy representatives, DFID representative, Board members, PAC members and researchers present at the meeting. The issue of funding demand-led research, developing young and 'barefoot researchers' through capacity building activities were appreciated by the representatives of Dutch Embassy and DFID. Mr. Jaap van der Zeeuw was so much impressed to see a large number of rural, community-based researchers, atypical of other organizations, and commented that RIB deserve commendation for their unique and outstanding contribution to poverty research.

After giving a brief description of the research, the researchers also described on how their research results would be useful to the poverty group. These research results are not only generating new knowledge but also will build capacity of the local people. Many of the researchers appreciated RIB's support for demand-led research where they get ample independence of carrying out research as per their own agenda. The researchers also appreciated research on different marginalized groups who are also known as the "missing poor". There are a lot of organizations that do not keep this missing poor community in their priority list. RIB's researchers appreciated RIB's efforts to look at poverty research not only with one's socio-economic aspect but also on other human issues. RIB's effort to look at the needs of vulnerable groups from a more holistic perspective, which meant looking at creative and aesthetic needs as part and parcel of their basic needs really motivated many individuals to submit their research proposal to RIB

Reception Function

A reception was held on 21 November, 2004 at 7:00 at RIB premises in honour of Mr. Kees Beemsterboer, His Excellency the Ambassador of the Netherlands in Bangladesh and Mr. Theo van de Sande of Research & Communication Division, Department of Cultural Co-operation, Education and Research, Government of the Netherlands. Also present were local Dutch Embassy officials, researchers, friends and partners of RIB.

Dr. Shamsul Bari, Chairman of RIB, welcomed the guests and briefed them about RIB's activities and achievements. He also introduced the members of the Board of Directors of RIB. Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Executive Director, then introduced the researchers and the research projects supported by RIB.

Theo van de Sande commented that the RIB supported research programmes are well suited to

the needs of different marginalized communities and the researchers engaged with such programmes deserve trust and confidence from the communities concerned as well as from the donors. Mr. Kees Beemsterboer thanked the RIB authority for inviting him to this important function and congratulated the researchers and participants attending the function. He informed the participants that RIB is doing work that goes beyond conventional development research. Poor people are the central focal point and the researchers are helping them to solve their problems utilising their own knowledge and skills. He commented that the types of research conducted with RIB support RIB very important and it is a great privilege for him to come over here and join with the people associated with these activities.

A part of the PAR- based Pala Gan (Folk songs) was then presented before the audience by the animators of the Nilphamari PAR project.

The meeting ended with light refreshment at about 9:30 pm.

Education Workshop

On October 14th 2004, RIB held an education workshop. Outside participants included BRAC Education Programme (BEP), Ain o Salish Kendro (ASK) as well as a host of education consultants and practitioners. The workshop was centered around learner-centered methodologies that are being used for non-formal primary school education and teaching techniques for children who have no access to education at all. The basic objective of the seminar was to create a forum where ideas could be shared and exchanged amongst pre-school teachers who have had varying experiences teaching the marginalized and the rural poor. ASK, BEP and RIB gave short presentations of their teaching methodologies they have developed or currently use as well as various training methods currently at use for instructing teachers. The floor was then opened up for a general discussion session where all participants shared their ideas and asked questions on the different models that were presented.