



# The Fading Food of the Indigenous Peoples

by Eleanor P. Dictaan-Bang-oa

**One with Their Land.** With their traditional weapons, Adivasi women join a huge mobilisation at Chakadoba village in Medinipur district of West Bengal, India.

Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

*Food security refers to people's sustained access to food that is adequate in quantity and quality to maintain a healthy life; and that is socially acceptable at all times. But with the massive influx of large-scale mining, palm oil and monoculture plantations, hydroelectric power dams, logging, and exclusive tourism development, among others in indigenous territories, such access has been denied to indigenous peoples (IPs).*

**Moreover,** the introduction of conflicting policies and programmes on land, water and other resources, “intellectual property” regimes and international trade laws, which do not respect prior and existing rights, has further galvanised these aggressions to multiple forms of oppression, particularly among indigenous women.

For indigenous women who are at the forefront of domestic and resource management, it is not enough that food is available but many people, especially IPs are too poor to buy the food they need, especially when they have been displaced from their traditional sources of food. It requires the recognition of IP's ownership and control of their lands, territories and resources.

### **Poverty in the Land of Plenty**

Indigenous territories worldwide are the last remaining bastions of biological and cultural diversity. These have been preserved by the IPs' high regard for land as sacred, it being the basic source of life. Thus the general principles of stewardship and reciprocity are deeply embedded in their traditional knowledge and resource management practices. While only comprising less than four per cent of the world's population, IPs constitute 95 per cent of cultural diversity and over 50 per cent of this population are found in high biodiversity areas.

Yet indigenous women are overrepresented in poverty which is even magnified in statistics on women's health. In Guatemala, most of the 121 maternal mortality rate per 1,000 live births in 2005 occurred among indigenous women, who compose a big chunk of the 21.5 per cent of people living in extreme poverty. According to Australia's Institute of Health and Welfare, there is an alarming 21.5 maternal death rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women compared to 7.9 among non-indigenous women as of 2005.

The poverty among IPs can only be explained by decades of exclusion and structural poverty. In the Philippines, 12 million hectares or 40 per cent of the country's total land area have been earmarked for mining investments. More than half of these are found in indigenous territories. In the Cordillera region alone, which is basically an IP territory, 60 per cent of the land is covered with mining applications. In Mindanao, ten mining applications target the ancestral domains of several Lumad groups, aside from the already earmarked 1.2 million hectares for agrbusiness development including biofuel crops. These are even outside of the 500,000 hectares which are now under agribusiness corporations.

In the North East Region of India, there are 168 proposed big dams in line with the country's "Look East Policy." This is aside from the 24 others which are reportedly under construction. Furthermore, in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand, 1.4 million people, 79 per cent of which are tribals, have been reportedly displaced from an estimated total land area of 10.2 million hectares appropriated for mines, industrial plants and dams in the last ten years.

The IPs' access to land not only ensures a sincere stewardship of the environment but also the sustainable sourcing for their survival and that of their future generations. These have been the core elements of the IP's perennial struggle. Dianao Cut-ing, an elderly woman from Ifugao, standing against the entry of the Climax Arimco Mining Company of Australia in Didipio, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines remarked: "Even if I am an old woman, I will fight. With land, even if it is small, if you are industrious, you will be able to eat. There is *camote* (sweet potato), *gabi* (yam) and rice. If you plant vegetables, you will have food. That is plenty to live on. Even if you have a lot of money, but you don't have rice, would you be able to chew your money?"

Meanwhile, Mama Aleta Baun a Mollo woman, who campaigned against the marble mining in her community in West Timor in Indonesia echoed a basic question of most indigenous women who are disproportionately impacted in the loss of their lands and resources: "Why does government issue license for investors to take away our livelihoods? Without land, we cannot eat."

IPs have the least carbon footprint and yet they have the most environmental services through their sustainable resource use and management practices, ensuring the sources of food and livelihood for future



**Military for Mining.**  
Community-based campaigns against large-scale mining are often met with a military response.

Photo courtesy of the Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center-Kasama sa Kalikasan/ Friends of the Earth-Philippines.

generations. But such contribution is being sacrificed for the security and luxury of others.

### Production for Who?

The import dependent-export oriented production scheme that has prevailed over developing countries since colonisation, followed by skewed development priorities, has resulted in the neglect of basic sectors like agriculture and social services.

The “green revolution” that was supposed to guarantee food security through bigger production and income with the use of competitive high yielding varieties has not only resulted in the loss of traditional food varieties but has also degraded soil productivity and environmental resilience due to the heavy use of synthetic farm inputs. Moreover, the intensified conversion of productive lands into monocropping and industrial plantations leaves very little scope for ensuring local consumption needs.

The Manobo women in Magpet, Cotabato, Philippines recount that the traditional rice variety planted in a quarter of a hectare land could yield 20 sacks of rice without any chemical input. With the introduction of hybrid corn varieties with an expected yield of 150-200 sacks per one hectare and a market value of about P1,000.00 per sack, many people have been encouraged to shift to corn production, leaving very little space for family food consumption. Income from the sale of their corn products is budgeted for the family’s basic needs, with a big portion

of it allocated for food. Nearby areas, which used to be rice fields were converted into rubber and cassava plantations.

The present attempts to address climate change speaks well of these skewed production priorities, despite the emerging incidents of food insecurity. Asia hosts the biggest oil palm production in the world, with Indonesia and Malaysia producing 44 and 43 per cent respectively of the world’s oil palm production as of 2006. In Sarawak, most of the 2.4 million hectares tagged by government as “development areas” that have been leased for monoculture of oil palm and pulp are indigenous territories. In Indonesia, 236,265.25 hectares, mostly inhabited by IPs, have been devoted to the oil palm plantations of 141 companies.

### From Colonisation to Globalisation: Who benefits?

The displacement of IPs has been a common experience since the period of colonisation, except that the present galvanises such condition with the aggressive interplay of different economic and political factors and conditions, which heavily impact the already marginalised IPs.

Trade liberalisation allows massive extraction of natural resources by corporate and business interests, which are often aided by the State security forces and private armed groups.

Consequently, conflicts and violence arise as IPs assert their rights to survival, where responses come in the form of militarisation that is couched under the purposes of “peace and order,” “national security” and “anti-insurgency,” among others. Indeed globalisation, dominated by the industrialised states and their multinational corporations, is the new face of colonisation.

In Thailand, IPs are arrested for encroaching into their own traditional territories which are now labeled as government lands and

national forest reserves. In India, the inception of the Land Transfer Regulation has precipitated thousands of land conflict cases involving tribal people claiming their lands against non-tribals' encroachment. The Asian Commission on Human Rights (ACHR) reported that of the 72,001 cases filed, 33,319 cases, involving 162,989 acres

paid workers. Trade statistics show that 60 per cent of global trade is done among multinational corporations. Fifty per cent of the world's banana trade, for instance, is controlled by two companies while three companies control the world's tea market, according to a 2005 Action Aid report.

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### **How are Indigenous Women Faring?**

Indigenous women are generally surviving these compounded issues by maximising their traditional knowledge and resources at hand. Hunger is a form of violence that may not be manifest yet this erodes the total well-being and self-worth of indigenous women and their families. Where there is very meager income for an indigenous household entrenched in a cash economy, management becomes a problem for women.

of land have reportedly been decided in favour of the non-tribals. In November 2007 in Nandigram, West Bengal, a number of villagers supporting the anti-land acquisition movement were shot dead, while the women were raped by cadres of the ruling party.

Indigenous women's access to food is threatened by the interplay of prevailing policies and systems that penetrate the household consumption patterns. This, on top of the multiple discrimination that indigenous women experience because of their gender, social status, ethnicity and other identities.

In Bangladesh, settlers, aided by the government and its armed forces, continue to grab the Adivasi's lands and farms despite the 1997 peace accord that ordered the cessation of the land distribution programme. In September 2008, 12 Adivasi women were reportedly injured and their houses ransacked by a group supported by a certain Mr. Lebu who is contesting the ownership of 10 acres of land around a pond in Tarashe in Sirajganj. The land has been home to Adivasi people for generations.

The poverty that ensues from displacement encourages migration in search for alternative sources of livelihood. Garo and Mandi women in the plains of Bangladesh reportedly compose a majority in Dhaka's beauty saloons. Asked why they were there, one revealed that their main livelihood was farming. Their fathers, knowing nothing on land registration lost their farmlands, forcing them to find work outside the village.

While agricultural development is seen as an answer to the food crisis, the prevailing export-oriented approach has failed to address global food security. In fact, such approach has fueled structural poverty where land resources and capital have become concentrated to a few multinational companies and the landless poor remain as

The diversity of food produced and collected by indigenous women from their farms, forests and waters used to provide the necessary nutritional value in the diet of IPs. However, the loss or degradation of these resources, brought about by unsustainable land use and resource extraction, has affected the IPs' nutritional intake. In the logging areas

of Sarawak for example, annual household meat consumption has declined from 54 to two kilograms in three decades.

Gender discrimination is also at play in corporations whose production bases are located in indigenous territories. Indonesia's oil palm industry, for instance, prefers men over women from indigenous groups.

Indigenous women may find employment as informal workers, including being domestic workers in cities or abroad. But such situations often mean lower wages than their male counterparts and the absence of social benefits. The exposure of indigenous women to pesticides in oil palm plantations in West Sumatra has also affected their families' health since these women are denied protective gears while working. Hence pesticide residues are still on their skin and clothes when they prepare meals for their families.

Moreover, given their gender, class, ethnicity and limited education, indigenous women have become more vulnerable to violence. Trafficking and prostitution are realities among indigenous girls and women who are lured by job offers with a promising income for their families. Recently, indigenous girls from North East India were brought to Malaysia and ended up prostituted. They were promised work in Singapore. In Bangladesh, three girls and one boy from Adivasi villages have reportedly been

abducted between January and February 2007. Meanwhile, some of our sisters from the Cordilleras were brought home in coffins, some of them with missing body parts.

In militarised areas, women risk violence when they go out in pursuit of their economic activities. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, Adivasi women who traditionally control and manage their income from their farm products can no longer venture out, with the countless cases of human rights violations and gender violence that occurred despite a peace accord. They now rely on their husbands to bring their farm products to the market. The situation has likewise diminished the traditional social position of indigenous women, given the reduction of their roles in decision-making at the household and community levels.

Gender discrimination also strengthens patriarchy in traditions. At the dining table, this translates to the practice of men and boys given the best part of the meal while the women divide what is left among themselves. In other Adivasi communities in Bangladesh, a very protectionist attitude has confined women and girls within their homes and communities, making the prospects of higher education and opportunities for women nil. Moreover, trade liberalisation and industrial encroachment have not only made indigenous women too dependent on a cash economy but also on their husbands.

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Although the growing market for traditional food varieties and organic farming may command premium prices and may offer opportunities for IPs, this has also encouraged IPs' further subscription to a cash economy as well as consumption of low-quality food and other products. Indigenous women in Kalinga, Philippines who are still able to grow their traditional rice varieties are now planting them for export while using the cash earned to buy cheaper and lower quality commercial rice.



## Chittagong Hills

The Chittagong Hill Tracts are located on the south-eastern part of Bangladesh, bordering countries such as India and Burma. The Hills have been populated by the Jummas or communities of various indigenous peoples in the region such as the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Khyang, Lushai, Khumi, Chak, Murung, Bowm and Pankoo. However, the region has been contested even before the Partition and independence of South Asian countries.

In 1972, a Jumma delegation asked then prime minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to

maintain the autonomy of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and allow a ban on the migration of non-Jummas into the area, among others. However, these demands were rejected. The 1972 Constitution also made no provisions for any special status for the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Nonetheless, the Parbhatia Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti - Chittagong Hill Tracts People's Solidarity Association (PCJSS), a coalition of indigenous groups in the area was formed.

By 1975, the government began the systematic displacement of the Jummas to further wrest its control over the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It launched the Planned Population Transfer which encouraged over half a million Bengalis to live in this region. This measure aggravated the already volatile situation and led to more human rights abuses such as massacres, detention, torture and extrajudicial killings against the Jummas. Around this time, Bangladesh received some overseas development assistance (ODA) which were initially committed to the development of "backward people" but later spent on the Bengali settlement in the Hills.

The Jummas soon developed its armed wing, the Shanti Bahini that fought the security forces of the government and the Bengali settlers. The conflict displaced some 70,000 Jummas or 10 per cent of the indigenous population. They found shelter in Tripura State in India during the massive series of exodus in 1986, 1989 and 1993. Through the years, the Jummas have become the minority, accounting for 50 per cent of the population in 2005, from 97 per cent in 1949.

In 1997, the government of Bangladesh signed a peace accord with PCJSS. Among its highlights include the creation of a regional council, the withdrawal of the military, and the reclamation of Jummas' lands from the settlers. Unfortunately, the government has been quite slow in implementing much of the agreement and a spate of violence has been occurring in the region. The peace accord has also been under severe criticism, especially by the opposition then which now dominates Bangladeshi politics.

**Sources:** Amnesty International. (1 February 2000). "Bangladesh: Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts." URL: <http://asiapacific.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA130012000?open&of=ENG-BGD>; Asia-Pacific Human Rights Network. (10 December 1999). "Elusive Peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts." URL: <http://www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/hrfeatures/HRF11.htm>; Chakma, Leena. (2004). "Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord." URL: [www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/minorities/docs/ASK\(B\)3a.doc](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/minorities/docs/ASK(B)3a.doc); and Jumma Peoples Network-Japan. (10 July 2005). "Press Release by Jumma Peoples Network-Japan." URL: [http://www.hrcbm.org/CHT/Jumma\\_press\\_release\\_japan.html](http://www.hrcbm.org/CHT/Jumma_press_release_japan.html). Photo by Saifur Rahman Zunnun from Wikipedia Commons.

Today, climate change is an emerging factor impacting on food security, strengthening the links among indigenous women, their culture and their natural environment.

The observed scarcity of blueberries due to increasing temperatures in the Arctic also denotes the loss of one rich source of vitamin C and antioxidants among the Saamis. Blueberries are closely associated with traditional Saami food and culture. Among Saami women,

blueberry picking is not just a culinary task but serves as a venue for transmission of traditional knowledge through stories and exchanges.

While indigenous women are exhausting their knowledge and skills to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change by walking longer distances to fetch water for domestic use or collect wild fruits, more interventions have to be done at the national and international levels.



**Apology for the Stolen Generations.** On 13 February 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised for the cruel policies and actions of past parliaments and governments against indigenous Australians, particularly the “stolen generations” or those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were forcibly separated from their families. While no compensation were offered to families, Rudd pledged to “close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity.” Australian indigenous women comprise more than 20 per cent of the country’s population under the poverty line.

Photo courtesy of Virginia Murdoch from Wikipedia commons. Source: ABC, (13 February 2008). “The Apology. URL: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/events/apology/text.htm>

## Indigenous Peoples’ Rights

The full recognition of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and its effective implementation by the states are supposed to address issues on food security of an estimated 300 to 350 million IPs worldwide, half of which are women. Although not in the status of a convention, the UNDRIP is a reiteration of the basic and particular human rights of IPs already found in existing and binding human rights laws.

But government and development actors need to move beyond their reactive management and reductionist approaches. Relief and food rationing are quite palliative measures to these problems, which must be understood in more holistic ways, from their roots to their impacts to different people, their relationships with other equality pressing issues, and their gender dimension.

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More sensitive and appropriate approaches have to be undertaken to enable the exercise of their right to food. Such approaches must not be limited to the goal of eradicating hunger but also the goal of having equal opportunities and enjoyment of all people of the right to food.

Free and prior informed consent of IPs must be the initial basis in developing any interventions. The promotion of gender equality and the status of indigenous women must likewise be a key element in these interventions.

The IPs’ traditional knowledge and practices are a big contribution in sustaining ecological health and resilience, that in turn support food production. The protection and sustainable use of the remaining resources of IPs, therefore, are critical not only for the IP themselves but to the global community.

For indigenous women, some basic preconditions of the fulfillment of their human rights lie in the recognition of their rights to own and manage their territories and resources and enjoy their benefits in terms of food, health and socio-cultural integrity. ■

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