

HerStory4

STRUGGLES AND SUCCESSES:
Indigenous Women voices
and perspectives



Published by:
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact

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Supported by: Swedish International Development
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◆ FOREWORD

The Indigenous Women's movement has been promoting another way of looking at records of events or personal accounts as "her story" instead of "history". This is clearly an attempt to rectify historical accounts to include the perspectives, struggles and invaluable contributions of Indigenous Women. It is also to raise the voices Indigenous Women and make them more visible, not only for the past but also for the present. "Herstory" is now gaining more attention as part of the overall gender-equality goal being championed Indigenous women.

The Indigenous Women's voices and "herstories", as an integral part of the women's movement and Indigenous Peoples' movement, remain faint. This reflects the overall conditions of Indigenous Women as relatively more marginalized, discriminated against and dis-empowered at all levels. It also illustrates the urgent need to strengthen Indigenous Women's organizations and institutions, as well as their leadership and effective participation, in all matters that concern them as women and as Indigenous Peoples.

Through the 'HerStory Series' AIPP aspires to raise awareness on the realities of Indigenous Women's struggles and achievements, as told by Indigenous Women themselves. These books, as compilations of Indigenous Women's "her stories", reflect the conditions and struggles on the ground and have proven to be effective ways of ensuring the stories, struggles and triumphs of Indigenous Women across Asia are heard.

AIPP produces this fourth volume to amplify the voices and struggles of Indigenous Women in the Asia region. This year we wanted to mark and celebrate International Women's Day by contributing to the theme 'Balance for better'. Through documenting and disseminating changes, struggles and achievements of Indigenous Women change makers under the topic of 'Role of Indigenous Women in Balance for Better', we wish to increase recognition of the rights of Indigenous Women, both within their communities and outside, to promote the solidarity of all Indigenous Women, and to create a tool for advocacy at all levels.

This book features the stories of 15 extra-ordinary Indigenous Women or women groups. They are in the hearts and minds of other women and villagers because of their suffering, struggles, sacrifices, commitments, dedication and lifetime achievements in advancing the dignity of women and Indigenous Peoples. They echo the realities on the ground and their actions are inspiring reflections of what can be done. Their shared aspiration for equality and dignity for all needs the support of everyone. After all, the world will only be truly free if women and Indigenous Peoples are equal to the rest of society and cultural diversity is respected and promoted.

*Gam A Shimray
Secretary General
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact*

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◆ ACRONOMYS

3SPN	Sesan, Sekong and Srepok Protection Network
AIPP	Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BIWN	Bangladesh Indigenous Women's Network
BMP	Bangladesh Mohila Porishad
BRIMAS	Borneo Research Institute
CDM	Clean Development Mechanism
CF	Community Forestry
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
CIPA	Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Alliance
CIPO	Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Organization
CIYA	Cambodia Indigenous Youth Association
CLT	Community Land Titling
COAC	Center for Orang Asli Concerns
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
DRAF	Disability Advocacy Rights Fund
DRF	Disability Rights Fund
DSM	Dumagat Sierra Madre
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organizations
FLU	Farmers Land Union Organization
FPIC	Free, Prior and Informed Consent
GOC	General Officer Commander
HA	Highlander Association
HWF	Hill Women's Federation
ICCA	Indigenous People Customary Conserved Area
IDA	International Disability Alliance
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IPO	Indigenous Peoples Organizations
IPWD	Indigenous Person with Disabilities
IPWDGN	Indigenous Person with Disabilities Global Network
IWNT	Indigenous Women Networks in Thailand
JJVS	Jashpur Jan Vikas Sanstha
JOAS	Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia
KDCKSA	Kokborok Development Committee and Kokborok Sahitya Acadami

KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KWAT	Kachin Women's Association Thailand
LCG	Land Core Group
MCRB	Myanmar Center for Responsible Business
MRLG	Mekong Region Land Governance
MWSS	Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System
NCWS	New Centennial Water Source
NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NFDN	National Federation of the Disabled Nepal
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NHRC	National Human Rights Commission
NIDA	Nepal Indigenous Disabled Association
NIDWAN	National Indigenous Disabled Women Association Nepal
NIPT	Network of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand
NTFP	Non-timber forest products
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PACOS	Partners of Community Organisations
PCJSS	Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti
PCP	Pahari Chatro Parishod
PDF	Pacific Disability Forum
PhilHealth	Philippine Health Insurance Corporation
POINT	Promotion of Indigenous and Nature Together
REDD	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
RLS	Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung
RM	Rural Municipality
SADIA	Sarawak Dayak Iban Association
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SIS	Safeguard Information System
SLC	School Leaving Certificate
SSS	Social Security System
TFIP	Task Force for Indigenous Peoples Rights
TOT	Training of Trainers
TSF	Tripura Student's Federation
TWG	Technical Working Group

UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNFPII	United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNVFIP	United Nations Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WEMAN	Women's Empowerment Mainstreaming and Networking
WLB	Women's League of Burma

◆ INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Peoples, more than 370 million globally including around 260 Million in Asia, are advocating and amplifying their voices to uphold their rights. Disproportionately affected from multiple forms of discrimination and oppression based on their ethnicity, race, location and economic status; rendering them part of the poorest of the poor, most politically disempowered and culturally and socially victimized. In addition to this, Indigenous Women constituting more than 50% of total Indigenous Peoples population are even more discriminated and marginalized on the basis of the intersectionality of their gender and ethnicity.

The dimensions of gender oppression and exploitation of Indigenous Women have distinctive features in the customary laws, practices and beliefs of Indigenous Peoples. The practice of customary law is still prevalent, and more dominant, than national legal systems in many Indigenous communities across Asia. Customary practices relating to Indigenous Women have both positive and negative aspects in relation to women's rights governing their daily lives in many communities. Indigenous customary laws are largely against violence against Indigenous Women (VAIW) as they provide due recognition to the physical integrity of women as child bearers. On the other hand, customary laws do not consider women as equal to men in almost all aspects, including in decision-making. Traditional governance systems are only for men, and in general, the heavy agricultural work is left to the women. The traditional patriarchal system and mentality still prevail in the relationship of Indigenous men and women.

However, Indigenous Women are playing significant role in Indigenous Peoples' and women's movements for collective as well as individual rights. However, their voices, struggles and contributions are not documented, less visible and insufficiently recognized. Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) realized the fact and endeavored to bring the stories of Indigenous Women's struggles, successes and insights through 'Herstory'. 'Herstory' aims to consolidate the selfless efforts of Indigenous Women, disseminate the documented walks of their lives and contribute to account outcomes into wider Indigenous Peoples movements. These inspirational her stories encourage all the Indigenous Women and Indigenous Peoples including young generations and provide justice to those heroes contributing in multiple arenas at different level which are dispersed and unnoticed.

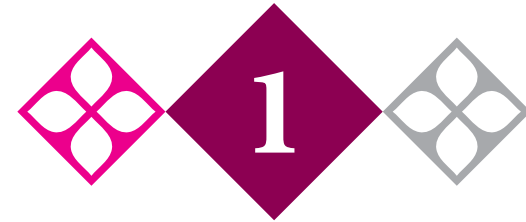
AIPP through 'HerStory Series' has been rejoicing the successes and disseminating the aspirations of Indigenous Women change makers across the Asia. The journey of AIPP's Herstory started in 2013 with publication of 'HerStory of Empowerment, Leadership and Justice', off the back of the Empowering

Indigenous Women in Traditional Customary Institutions. It continued in 2014, a second book-length collection of personal essays and stories by Indigenous Women change makers was produced as 'Rewriting Herstory'. Third edition in 2016 zoomed into Indigenous Women as land rights defenders, in line with the Global Call to Action on Indigenous and Community Land Rights. These collections have proven to be effective ways of ensuring the stories, struggles and triumphs of Indigenous Women in the region are heard. All these collections were widely distributed amongst CSO's and donors and were even picked up by some academic institutions to contribute to university curriculums. Therefore, 'HerStory' series is an opportunity to inform the public of the realities of Indigenous Women's struggles and achievements, as told by Indigenous Women themselves.

This year, AIPP marked International Women's Day through launching 'HerStory 4' story collection and sourcing initiatives with the theme of '**Role of Indigenous Women in Balance for Better**'. AIPP is committed and will maintain legacy and contribute '#BalanceforBetter' through documenting and disseminating changes, struggles and achievements of Indigenous Women change maker. Finally in 2019, we are publishing 'HerStory 4', with the generous support of 15 daring Indigenous Women leaders, Activist and Change makers. This volume is a cross-section between different themes; it focusses on Indigenous Women's social and political leadership in promoting gender equality, their impact and contribution as Human Rights defenders, the role they play in advancing Indigenous peoples movement and their struggles to protect their land, territories and resources. These topics are sometimes overlapping because in their fight against violence, to protect Human Rights or empower their community, Indigenous Women are often breaking gender barriers and clearing the path for other women to take up leadership roles. While doing so they inspire other Indigenous Women to raise their voices and demand their rights.

The following stories have been collected through the tireless dedication of our sisters and friends from Indigenous communities in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Many of the forthcoming stories have been narrated in the storyteller's Indigenous language, translated into the national language, and then translated again into English. In order to protect the integrity of the stories and in respect for the authors, the majority of the text has been directly translated with minor technical editing. The stories have passed through many ears to end at this publication, and we applaud those women who have participated, for their bravery and commitment in sharing their stories.

This publication is a reflection of the hard work of everyone involved in the Indigenous Women's movement in Asia. We hope that this collection of stories can be used to empower and promote the solidarity of all Indigenous Women.



Indigenous Women in Movement building

- 1.1. Pratima Gurung, Nepal
- 1.2. Shirley Seng, Burma
- 1.3. Jashoda Reang, India

1.1. Pratima Gurung: A voice for the voiceless

Name: Pratima Gurung,

Ethnicity: Gurung

Address: Rainaskot, Lamjung, Nepal



❖ Pratima as a speaker in the High-Level Political Forum, New York, 2017.

"While I was travelling as a researcher through rural villages in Nepal in 2016, I saw many Indigenous Women, women with disabilities and other marginalized communities who were in vulnerable and critical situations. They were confined within the four walls of their house and were often neglected and abused. Women with disabilities were at a higher risk of

violence and discrimination and had no voice to speak up for themselves. After discussing with them and their family members, I discovered that they were unaware of their rights and the services they could receive. Seeing those critical situations encouraged me to work on the issues of Indigenous Women with disabilities. As I had experience working on Indigenous Peoples and disability issues, I had the understanding to look at how these multiple identities intersect and the impact of these intersections. Having similar experiences of facing institutional and structural discrimination in my own life, I committed myself to work for my community and people. Today, I am proud to represent myself as an Indigenous Woman with a disability and to reiterate that I am a voice for the voiceless and a hope for change. Today we want our issues to be mainstreamed in all women, disability, Indigenous and State discourses and ensure rights for all marginalized groups, so no one will be left behind."



❖ Pratima interacting with an Indigenous woman with a disability in the post-earthquake situation in Nepal 2016.

Pratima Gurung is an emerging leading academic activist. She is a powerful, passionate and proactive Indigenous Woman with a disability. She comes from the mountainous country Nepal and was born in the beautiful region of Mount Machapuchree, one of the Himalaya mountains in Pokhara. Advocating vigorously for the protection and promotion of Indigenous Peoples and Women with disabilities around Asia since 2013, today she is the symbol and pride of our community. During her childhood, she was made familiar with her ethnic Gurung culture, language, practice of doing things collectively in the community and the traditional customary practice of 'we-feeling' among the Gurung people that has shaped her mind and behavior to work at the community level.

At the age of seven, her passion to work for her community was reinforced because of an unforgettable incident that had occurred in her life. She had an accident and became disabled. Recalling those days of her childhood, she asserts, "My family and I were shocked by the incident because I was the first person in my family to face disability. It was a very traumatizing situation for my family because I had to stay for more than one and a half years in the hospital for my treatment. During that time, I had to stop my education. I did not know anything about disability, but I was always hopeful in my life. My grandmother was an ideal inspiration to me. She taught me that problems bring challenges and opportunities at the same time. This has shaped me into a fighter".

Being disabled taught Pratima how to cope with challenges. She was fortunate that she had good grandparents, like her grandmother who always encouraged her to continue her education despite the traditional patriarchal values and the discriminatory disability stigma prevalent in Nepali society. She was encouraged to live her life independently. After she received her master's degree in 2004, she engaged herself to work on issues relating to Indigenous Peoples in Nepal and started doing research on disability. In 2007, during the later phase of her research she became acquainted with many Indigenous Peoples and Women with disabilities issues. When she did her Master of Philosophy in 2010, she did her research on disability issues in Nepal and became more knowledgeable about this. Indigenous Women with disabilities told her about the difficult situations they were facing like the lack of access to resources, education, employment and justice, and the many different layers of discrimination, such as being a woman, whilst also being Indigenous or disabled, or both. All these social identities interact, impact and situate Indigenous Women with disabilities at the lowest level of the social hierarchy. Through her research, she got the opportunity to hear those voices.

She was fortunate that she had good grandparents, like her grandmother who always encouraged her to continue her education despite the traditional patriarchal values and the discriminatory disability stigma prevalent in Nepali society.

Pratima became interested and decided to further explore the ground reality. She delved into the existing literature on Indigenous Peoples with disabilities, but only a few countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Guatemala and Canada had literatures and evidence on Indigenous Peoples with disabilities. As a voracious learner, Pratima started to look deeper into the situation in Nepal. The cases of people having multiple identities, the intersections between those identities and especially, Indigenous Peoples with a disability were not recognized as a Human Rights issue in Nepal. She could not find any evidence or policies on them. 'Indigenous Peoples' and 'People with Disabilities' have both been categorized as marginalized groups, however, the intersections of these identities and social categories were not taken into account.

The issues of Indigenous Peoples lacked a political agenda in Nepal, similarly to other Asian countries. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) legally affirmed the rights of peoples with disabilities in Article 21 and 22, however, ensuring the protection of the rights of people who are both Indigenous and disabled was not an easy task. Pratima started to collect information, literature and other evidence on Indigenous Peoples with disabilities, and connected with global stakeholders like International Disability Alliance (IDA) and became a member of the Indigenous Person with Disabilities Global Network (IPWDGN) in 2012 with the support of Disability Advocacy Rights Fund (DRAF).

In 2013, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) conducted a study on the Indigenous persons with disabilities' situation. The same year, the Disability Caucus was formed to unite and raise the issues of Indigenous Peoples with disabilities at the UNPFII.



❖ Pratima sharing Indigenous Peoples with Disability Issues and Challenges in Nepal, 2016.

Pratima was selected to work as a fellow for IDA and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). As a fellow, she continued her work by lobbying the OHCHR, different UN agencies, and the UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples (UNVFIP) to promote the representation of Indigenous Peoples with disabilities in those organizations. That same year, the OHCHR adapted their building to make it accessible for people with disabilities as a result of a global campaign that Pratima was part of, and which was set up by IDA, IPWDGN and other stakeholders. Similarly, Pratima and her team from IPWDGN and IDA, were able to ensure that people with disabilities could apply for travel support and participation in fellowships from the UNVFIP. During her work in Geneva, Pratima attended many meetings and consultations with UN agencies and was present at many UN events in order to raise awareness and highlight the emerging issues of Indigenous Peoples with disabilities.

She established relationships with people from her community, experts, professionals, leaders, researchers and activists in order to share and learn about experiences concerning situations and problems that Indigenous Peoples with disabilities face.

The ongoing global advocacy galvanized Pratima to return to her country and work for the rights of Indigenous Peoples with disabilities and her community through the Nepal Indigenous Disabled Association (NIDA). NIDA was formed by a few Indigenous Peoples with disabilities and became a member of the National Federation of the Disabled Nepal (NFDN) and Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN). Pratima joined NIDA as a member and contributed by building momentum for the issues of Indigenous Peoples with disabilities in the marginalized disability, Indigenous and women movements in Nepal. Because of her teamwork skills, NIDA started to function more smoothly as an institution. She established relationships with people from her community, experts, professionals, leaders, researchers and activists in order to share and learn about experiences concerning situations and problems that Indigenous Peoples with disabilities face. Her association with many international networks and organizations such as Disability Rights Fund (DRF), IDA, IPWDGN, Pacific Disability Forum (PDF) and the Disability Caucus in UNPFII allowed her to bring the voices of the Indigenous Peoples with disabilities from Nepal into the global arena.

Pratima recalls those days, “It was very difficult and challenging to advocate for the rights of Indigenous Peoples with disabilities in Nepal because most IPWDs were unaware and not united. They were not in a situation to claim their rights”. She adds, “It was hard and difficult and I am still on the same journey in 2019. I feel it is just the beginning because we are still in the same situation. I often feel I do not fit in the disability, Indigenous or women groups and discourses. I feel I belong nowhere because I have multiple identities and these identities intersect each other. Our issues and concerns are often considered as the lowest priority, so our fight and struggles are at three levels. We first have to seek the space to raise the voices and issues within ourselves. Secondly, we have to look for our multiple identities in the broader women, Indigenous, disability and marginalized groups and movements. We also have to unite, work together and build synergies to bridge the gap between those multiple identities. Thirdly, we have to claim our rights as Indigenous Peoples with disabilities to ensure that they will be translated in policies and provisions so we can enjoy our rights as ‘other people’. So I feel we need to work more collectively on these issues because they have now become associated with emerging discourses related to climate change and disasters. Many studies have reported that the prevalence of disability among Indigenous Peoples is higher compared to non-Indigenous Peoples, though, disability can happen to any one of us anywhere, at any time, any age.”

“It was very difficult and challenging to advocate for the rights of Indigenous Peoples with disabilities in Nepal because most IPWDs were unaware and not united. They were not in a situation to claim their rights”.

Pratima believes in ‘incessant work that contributes to her advocacy work’. She has been advocating endlessly for the protection and promotion of IPWDs both globally and locally. Through her initiation and dedication, together with the entire team of NIDA, she was successful in making NIDA a member organization of Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP). Now NIDA is the first Asian organization with a legal status working for Indigenous Peoples with disabilities. Since then, she has been endlessly raising the issues of people with disabilities



❖ Pratima in earthquake-stricken area for recovery and rehabilitation.

as the Asian focal person of the IPWDGN. During this journey, AIPP, NIDA and the National Indigenous Disabled Women Association Nepal (NIDWAN) managed in 2018 to collectively submit the first historical shadow report on the situation of IPWDs in Nepal at the UN CRPD committee. For this report, Pratima took the lead at the local level. She participated at the eighth CRPD committee pre-session in Geneva in September 2017 and she also spoke to the CRPD committee members on the main session in February 2018 about the issues of Indigenous Peoples, peoples with disabilities, or both. With the effort and support of IDA and AIPP, she was able to raise her strong voice and provide a lot of recommendations to the government of Nepal to ensure, protect and promote the rights of Indigenous Women with disabilities. Being able to work on the ground with relevant stakeholders to ensure, protect and fulfill the rights of IPWDs was a landmark achievement for the IPWDs of Nepal.

Now NIDA is the first Asian organization with a legal status working for Indigenous Peoples with disabilities.



❖ Pratima responding on Indigenous Peoples with disability issues at the 18th Session of CRPD, CRPD Committee Geneva-2018.

Next to this, Pratima was also engaged with her research. She discovered that Indigenous Women with disabilities were at a greater risk of violence and that rape and neglect was rampant. The most critical untold and unheard stories of Indigenous Women with disabilities were concerning marriage, motherhood, rape, violence, abuse, forced sterilization and neglect, and they were increasing at an alarming rate. However, there was a gap between the reality she had discovered and what previous research had found. Therefore, Pratima decided in 2015 to establish the National Indigenous Disabled Women Association Nepal (NIDWAN) in order to work on the issues of Indigenous Women with disabilities and to reach the most vulnerable and marginalized groups. She had noticed that after the 2015 earthquake many young Indigenous Women with disabilities were compelled to leave their village. They had to stay in an open space in Kathmandu valley for several months where they were very vulnerable and exposed to many risks. So, these young women with disabilities united to establish NIDWAN with the mission to ensure the right to a dignified life and protection for young Indigenous Women with disabilities. Through NIDWAN, they have worked in emergency situations and provided education, health and employment services to Indigenous Women with disabilities.

They had to stay in an open space in Kathmandu valley for several months where they were very vulnerable and exposed to many risks.

At present, the concerns of Indigenous Women with disabilities have been connected with emerging issues like climate change, forced migration and displacement, disaster risk reduction and the increasing rate of facing multiple discriminations at the same time. Moreover, their situation is critical and precarious all around the globe. This is why NIDWAN's approach is to create a cross-movement collaboration at a local, regional and global level with all relevant stakeholders and to seek support and funds to work on strengthening the capacity of young Indigenous woman with disabilities. NIDWAN has recently started to help young Indigenous Women for thier education and prepare them for their professional lives so they could contribute to their community and reflect on disability, and Indigenous values and systems.

I am proud to say that I, Ranjana Dhami, am one of them. My career has been advanced through associating with NIDWAN and becoming a follower of Pratima Gurung. She has always been a motivator and an inspiration for all young women with disabilities like me. She strongly encourages Nepalese women with disabilities to obtain an education. Through NIDWAN, young Indigenous woman with disability like myself, have found a common space to share our stories and experiences with our colleagues and co-workers.



❖ Pratima with the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Ms. Catalina Devandas, Nepal -2018.

“The IPWDs’ journey from 2008 has taught many lessons globally and locally, where bridging the gaps, breaking the barriers, acknowledging diversity and exploring possible intersections and its impacts with a strategy to reach the most marginalized groups with funds and support within the Indigenous Women movement is crucial,” Pratima asserts. She further argues, *“There are a lot of hurdles and challenges to overcome on this journey. They have to be encountered through the support and collaboration of all, such as families, communities, society as a whole, relevant stakeholders and development partners. The discourse on Indigenous Peoples and women with disabilities is yet to be realized by all of us and the rightsholders need to unite to claim their rights at all levels.”*

Pratima Gurung is not only a community leader. She is a voice for the many voiceless people who are still confined within the four walls of their houses.



❖ Pratima addressing the issues of intersectionality and Indigenous Peoples with disabilities at the EMRIP Session Geneva, 2017.

Today Pratima’s involvement and contribution complements Stephan Hawking’s quote *“Disability need not be an obstacle to success”*. Moreover, Pratima Gurung is not only a community leader. She is a voice for the many voiceless people who are still confined within the four walls of their houses. Pratima Gurung is also a faculty member and an associate professor teaching at the Padma Kanya College, one of the only women’s colleges in Nepal. She adds great value to her teaching through her research on gender, disability, Indigenous, intersectional and inclusion issues which also reinforces evidence for NIDA and NIDWAN’s advocacy work. She did research on disability for her master’s degree in philosophy and is pursuing her PhD. In the meantime, she also contributes to implement the CRPD Concluding Observations at the local level. It is a landmark victory that the issues of IPWDs are evolving.

Today, Pratima is standing in the frontline with other (Indigenous) women with disabilities as a real hero and champion for more than 54 million IPWDs from all around the globe and 1.3 million IPWDs from Nepal.

*Written by Ranjana Dhami (Chaudhary)
National Indigenous Disabled Women Association Nepal (NIDWAN)*

1.2. Shirley Seng: A hope for Kachin Women and Children

Name: Shirley Seng

Ethnicity: Kachin

Address: Shan State, Burma



❖ Shirley Seng at Kutkai, Shan State, Burma.

Shirley Seng belongs to the Kachin Indigenous Peoples, an ethnic minority group originally from Shan State, Burma. She left her country more than forty years ago and is now a resident in Thailand. She was born on the 1 March 1947. She is the daughter of a man who was highly respected leader her hometown. Her life during her childhood was very good, but this changed

when she went to Thailand. After she finished her high school, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), a political group that fights for the rights of ethnic minority groups, offered her the chance to go study in Thailand. At first, she refused because she wanted to become a doctor and help her siblings. However, her father told her that she had been specially selected by the KIO to go study in Thailand. She believed her father and decided to go. The journey to Thailand was very rough and difficult. Along with 150 horses, she was accompanied by 250 KIO soldiers, including a medical team and women soldiers. They encountered fights with the Burmese soldiers while they were on their way to the Thai border for three times.

However, her father told her that she had been specially selected by the KIO to go study in Thailand. She believed her father and decided to go.

In December 1969, after more than a month of travelling under difficult conditions, she finally reached the Thai border area called Thamngob Mountain, which used to be a KIO military post. When she arrived in Thailand, she found out that the KIO had arranged a marriage between her and their leader, General Officer Commander (GOC) Lahtaw Zau Seng. She got married to him on 4 April 1970. After her marriage, she stayed in Bangkok and got the chance to study. Unfortunately, her husband was assassinated by betrayers of the KIO on 10 August 1975. They assassinated him when he was on his way from Chiang Mai to Thamngob Mountain. That time Shirley Seng was pregnant with their third child. She faced a lot of hardship as she was left alone with three children in Thailand. However, she never gave up and always continued to support her family. To raise her three children, she worked as a nursery schoolteacher and a jade broker.

After GOC Lahtaw Zau Seng was assassinated, some of his fellow soldiers stayed behind in Thailand. They did not want to go back to Burma, so they stayed together at the border. With the support of the King's Project, a Thai leader who knew GOC Lahtaw Zau Seng helped to establish a village called Ban Mai Kachin at the Thai-Burmese border. The aim of the King's project was to protect the forest and prevent from deforestation. After that, the former Kachin soldiers lived together in the village. When the King and his family visited Ban Mai Kachin village, Shirley Seng welcomed them and discussed the well-being of the village on behalf the villagers.

Due to the nationwide Burmese uprising in 1988, a lot of Burmese people migrated to Thailand. The uprising was started by university students in Yangon (Rangoon) on the 8 August 1988. Thousands of university students, monks and common people across the whole country protested against General Nay Win and his military junta. General Nay Win was forced to step down from his position because of his totalitarian single-party system. However, the military tackled the protest in a very aggressive way. They arrested the protesters, especially the students, and sent them to jail. Most of the students

Shirley Seng welcomed them and discussed he well-being of the village on behalf the villagers.

fled to Thailand due to this deteriorating political situation, but also because of economic crises and social problems. As Burma was ruled by a military junta, the country's economic situation was becoming worse and worse. The unemployment rate had increased significantly, and people were facing extreme hardships to survive, especially the ethnic groups in Burma. Also, the Kachin people, mainly young men and women, were forced to flee from their homeland to foreign countries due to the difficulties to find a job in Burma. They especially migrated to Thailand. As Shirley Seng was living in Thailand, she tried to help all the Burmese migrants in many ways. At that time, she was involved with an organization that helped students to study in Japan. She connected the migrated students with that organization. The other migrants, who came to Thailand to work, were often deceived by job agencies. This way they got stuck in Bangkok with no place to stay and they could not go back to Burma as well. Shirley Seng provided accommodation and food for them so they could take a shelter for three or four months. She also helped them to find a job while they were waiting to get a visa in Bangkok, and she even helped them with their visa application. She did her utmost to assist others even though she was struggling with her own family life.

The Kachin people, especially the women, who were working in Thailand faced many problems. Most of them were working as housekeepers, and some were being tortured by their housemaster, did not get full salaries, or were trafficked by job agencies. Due to these problems, Shirley Seng recognized the urgent need to help and empower the Kachin women in order to solve their problems. Shirley Seng and three other Kachin women came together to set up an organization called Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT) on the 9 September 1999. The organization was established in a small room by the four founders and one staff. Since its foundation, Shirley Seng and the staff have been working on behalf of the Kachin women for the empowerment and advancement of the Kachin women from Burma. KWAT is also one of the thirteen founding members of the Women's League of Burma (WLB) an organization that actively works for gender equality in Burma.



Until now, KWAT has been working on seven main activities. They organize capacity building programs for the Kachin women on the topics of gender, Human Rights, democracy, and management, leadership, English and computer skills. They collect, analyze, record and publish data on Human Rights, and give documentation trainings. They run a crisis support center and safe house for women who have been trafficked, provide vocational training to the survivors and trafficking awareness training to local communities. They also provide services to community clinics, for health surveys and education, and reproductive health trainings. Next to this, they have a political empowerment program which includes a women political forum, a monthly political exchange program, political awareness trainings (on democracy, constitution and federalism), Human Rights and Women's Rights trainings, and the development of awareness materials for the Kachin women from local communities. Since 1999, they also have an income generation project which is mainly based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. It offers vocational training to Kachin women who have recently been rescued from trafficking. They make handicrafts and after that, KWAT markets them. The project provides them with an opportunity to earn an independent income for themselves and their children, and to foster their self-confidence and personal pride. The handmade products are purses, iPhone bags, laptop bags, shoulder bags, pencil cases, name cards, bangles and necklaces. Finally, KWAT also works on advocacy at national and international level to raise awareness about the Human Rights situation, including the women's and political situation, in Burma.



❖ Shirley Seng at the Globemed meeting, 2017.

Shirley Seng has been working her entire life for the advancement of Kachin women to improve the lives of women and children in Kachin society through KWAT. From 1999 up until now, she has been participating in the WLB, Kachin Development Group, Shan-State Constitution Drafting Committee, and Ethnic Nationalities Council.

KWAT, which was founded by her, has provided jobs to more than sixty Kachin women through employing them in the organization. Currently she is seventy-two years old, but she is still very energetic and motivated to support the needy people in society. She has worked for KWAT as a Director, General Secretary and Supervisor and at present she is the leader of the Executive Committee. In this position, she has the responsibility to steer the organization to achieve its aims. No matter what happened in her life, Shirley feels honored to be the wife of GOC Lahtaw Zau Seng and she is proud of his dedication and loyalty to the Kachin people. Her favorite quote from Mahatma Gandhi is *"The future depends on what we do in the present"*.

Written by Jenny Lahpai

1.3. Jashoda Reang: An aspiration to Indigenous Women Organizations

Name: Jashoda Reang

Ethnicity: Kokborok

Address: Tripura, North East India



❖ Jashoda Reang

Jashoda Reang was born on the 10 February 1975, in a humble Indigenous Kokborok speaking family in Lakhisara village, situated in southern Tripura, Bangladesh. Her parents are Indigenous Peoples who have been living in the village for a long time. Both her parents were government teachers in their village. Her mother was a primary school teacher and

her father was a high school teacher at an upper secondary school. They have both retired from teaching years ago. Her mother is still alive, but her father is at eternal rest. She was the middle child of three with a sister and a brother.

Jashoda's village is beautifully surrounded by hills and valleys. It is a peaceful place where the Indigenous Peoples still practice many of their traditional ways of life and customary laws such as during marriages, the settlement of disputes among the village people, or the management of land. Many of the villagers are economically empowered, just a few Indigenous families are economically weak. However, in the very outskirts of the village there are many families who cannot meet their basic needs and are living below the poverty line. Irrespective of their financial situation, there is cooperation and solidarity among the villagers.

As the villagers carry on with their customary practices, they still enjoy and celebrate most of their festivals during which they perform their traditional rituals, dances, songs, wear their traditional dresses and eat their traditional food. Jashoda enjoyed her childhood and would participate in almost all the festivals of her village. She would dance and sing during the festivals. One of the famous festivals celebrated by the Reang Kokborok speaking Indigenous community of Tripura is *Boisu* (end-of-year festival). During the festival young and old join together to play music, sing songs and dance around the village, and go from family to family to wish them well. They often sing a particular refrain “*Bagra Ugma naikhewlai phaidi mwkhang kahammring*” (mother and owner of the family come and see our faces; we want to wish you all the best for the end of the year). This end-of-year festival recalls the good things from the past year, so it would be remembered as a good experience and that the same would come for the next year.

She would dance and sing during the festivals. One of the famous festivals celebrated by the Reang Kokborok speaking Indigenous community of Tripura is Boisu (end-of-year festival). During the festival young and old join together to play music, sing songs and dance around the village, and go from family to family to wish them well.

Jashoda's childhood was a happy one. She was well-brought-up by her parents. Her mother and father were mature, hardworking and financially stable. When Jashoda was young, she was inspired by both her parents. Her father used to gather the poor students at their home to teach them for free, and he would help them to buy their books and uniforms. He would also raise funds for the construction of school buildings and other infrastructures needed for the education of the children from the village. Many of his students are now well-educated and contributing to society. Besides being a teacher, he was also involved in social movements and political organizations. Because of Jashoda's father, the whole family was cultural and political aware. People in their village had a high respect for her father because of his social contributions and good deeds for the community members. Jashoda's mother was not engaged with any politics or social movements, but she was culturally

and politically aware. She was more into teaching, farming and taking care of the family members. So, Jashoda was taught by her father to help people in need and to contribute to the community. From her mother, she learned the importance of a good education, to take care of the family and to be financially independent. Her mother also taught her about traditional farming and foods, sing songs and weave rapper, bedcovers, *risa* (a traditional attire) and make Indigenous threads and colors.



❖ Jashoda in her ethnic dress during various activities organized by Indigenous organizations in Tripura (source: Khumtiya Debbarma)

In the village, the youngsters would join their families in traditional farming, starting from the selection of the best land for cultivation up to the harvesting. Jashoda was among the happy children who loved to help her parents and her community with traditional farming. Besides horticulture, the villagers also raised cattle in their homes such as cocks, hens, cows, goats and pigs. Jashoda also had her own cattle. She learned how to make money from selling vegetables, grains and cattle by-products like milk. With the money she received, she used to buy her books, pens, dresses and also helped to buy books for her needy friends. Moreover, she would personally visit and give moral support to the people who were hospitalized and help them with their finances. Because she was helping the needy families, children and sick people, she was inspired to become a doctor. She thought that by becoming a doctor, she could help the people more. She was also a topper in her class; her academic position was always between the first and fifth position.

She would also write many poems and short stories. Besides these academic activities, she also would take part in cultural activities and perform her Indigenous songs and dances at school. From primary school up to college, she was a regular member of the Tripura Student's Federation (TSF).

When she was a teenager, she shifted to a town school where she would receive a much better education. As such, her dedication and hard work continued. She would participate in storytelling, poems recitations and many other academic activities. She would also write many poems and short stories. Besides these academic activities, she also would take part in cultural activities and perform her Indigenous songs and dances at school. From primary school up to college, she was a regular member of the Tripura Student's Federation (TSF). She was inspired by their mission to enhance cultural education. During many of the TSF gatherings and events, she would recite her poems, tell stories, dance and sing. Jashoda explained that TSF was much stronger in her village than in town. TSF organized more activities in the village and provided Indigenous youth and children a platform to learn about their cultural values and the strength to come up in life with courage and confidence.

However, Jashoda also had to deal with some struggles during her youth. She had a poor health, so she could not study or perform other activities regularly. She would often suffer from severe headaches, eye problems, common colds and stomach aches. She has struggled to continue her studies in spite of her illness. Unfortunately, she was not able to take science as a major, so she could not fulfill her dream to become a doctor. Instead, she enrolled in the Arts program in Women's College. Today she cannot imagine how she managed to graduate from college because of her health problems, however, her mind was determined that she would graduate. When she was too sick to study, she used her experience and prior knowledge to pass her exams. To improve her health, she would do breathing and physical exercises.



❖ Jashoda's son and her husband
(source: Khumtiya Debbarma)

Later in life, she married a man who belonged to another ethnic group. It was a love marriage, but initially her family did not accept it. Nowadays both sides of the family are fine with it. Her husband has a socialist mindset, just like her, and helps Indigenous communities for which he has received many awards. Jashoda is encouraged and supported by her husband to continue her social activities. She is now working in a private

school. Next to the school lessons, she teaches the students cultural activities like Indigenous songs and dances. She also helps to buy books and uniforms for needy students. Moreover, she has helped to create awareness about health issues in her school and village. The main focus of the health awareness program was to stay clean and healthy. Being inspired by the activities of Mother Teresa and her kindhearted soul, she continues to give a helping hand to the needy, hungry and sick since her childhood.

Besides being a teacher, she is also a member of the *Kokborok Development Committee and Kokborok Sahitya Acadami* (KDCKSA) through which she contributes to the Kokborok literature. KDCKSA is an organization formed for the promotion of the Kokborok Indigenous

language of Tripura, and to discuss the many issues about the promotion of the language. One of their activities was to decide which script would be used for the Kokborok language. The most preferred script, by the majority of the Indigenous Peoples, was the English script.

Since her childhood, she had been aspiring to write a book. This dream has come true when she translated the book *Merchant of Venice* to Kokborok language. The book has been published by Autonomous District Council in Tripura and gained a lot of readers. It has also been used in college and in Tripura University as a part of the Kokborok literature, and Jashoda has been called to give lectures about the book. For her hard work, she has even received an award from the Government. She was also acknowledged for her work by a few Indigenous organizations from Tripura. In the future, she would like to contribute more to the Kokborok literature.

Currently, Jashoda is also the President of *Sudakshina Bwrwi Motha*, an Indigenous Women's organization in Tripura. It is a unit of the *Borok Women Forum*, of which she is also a member. The *Sudakshina Bwrwi Motha* has been named after Sudakshina, the Indigenous Woman leader and queen of Tripura. She was a leader who has brought up her three sons very well and turned them into good community leaders. In order to replicate Sudakshina's good upbringing of her children and her good activities, the *Sudakshina Bwrwi Motha* was established under the leadership of a few like-minded Indigenous Women. One of the main objectives of the organization is to educate the new generation on cultural values just like Sudakshina has done. Jashoda was chosen by the organization members as the president in 2018. Since her appointment, she has performed many community activities along with the organization's members.



❖ Queen 'Sudakshina', an Indigenous Women leader, after which the *Sudakshina Bwrwi Motha*, an Indigenous Women organization, has been named (source: Khumtiya Debbarma).

One of these activities is reviving traditional worships places. The organization has already visited two places. The first one was an Indigenous place, where the members have talked to the media about the history and culture of the place. The other place was a temple in Udaipur, Tripura. It is called *Ha Kwcharma Ama* (Land protector and keeper – Mother of Indigenous Peoples' lands) by the Kokborok Indigenous Women. Because the temple has been converted into a Hindu temple there is no more space for the Indigenous Peoples to worship. Moreover, it has been observed that for any celebration or other occasion, the Indigenous Peoples have to light a fire or else their worship ritual is assumed to be wrong. The government promised to protect the monuments of Tripura, such as this temple. However, nothing has changed up till now. So, the members of the *Sudakshina Bwrwi Motha* have visited the temple and are still trying their best to help the families who are carrying on with their traditional rituals to worship their Motherland and give ownership to their Mother, who is considered the keeper and protector of the Kingdom of Tripura since time immemorial. Next to this, the organization takes part in many food festivals in order to revive traditional *Tiprasa* food. This way they create a lot of experiences and different tastes for the people of Tripura. They also raise awareness on health issues, anti-trafficking, rights of Indigenous Peoples and women, and they give support to other Indigenous organizations in Tripura.

As a social worker, Jashoda Reang aspires that Indigenous organizations will continue to grow and contribute to their community. She aims to strengthen *Sudhakina Bwrwi Motha* and would like to continue to work and contribute to society. She also aspires to write more books, short stories and poems for the younger generations. She hopes that their traditional songs and dances will improve and that they want to continue with classical song performances. She also wishes that Indigenous Women will become aware of their Constitutional Rights and other rights. She aims to create more awareness on women's health, law issues and the Kokborok culture, both in her village and in town.

Written by Khumtiya Debbarma



Indigenous Women Defending their Rights

- 2.1. Ivy Joy Solang, Philippines
- 2.2. Kanda Pramongkit, Thailand
- 2.3. Chanchana Chakma, Bangladesh
- 2.4. Lwin Mar Aye, Myanmar

2.1. Ivy Joy Solang: The Power to fight back

Name: Ivy Joy Solang (Inayan Watch)

Ethnicity: Kankanaey

Address: Sagada, Mountain Province, Philippines



❖ Inayan Watch (source: Inayan Watch).

Sagada town, in Mountain Province in northern Philippines, was put in the spotlight on 25 July 2016. For the first time women enforced a citizen's arrest against a sexual abuser of more than a dozen children. After several failed attempts to catch the perpetrator red handed, around fifty women finally found the courage to just storm the abuser's abode and arrest him.

The group of women, who were mostly mothers, became suspicious of the child abuser, who was a migrant yoga instructor and masseur, when young girls were regularly visiting his rented house. They heard from the children that they were being paid P20 for helping with some household chores, particularly fetching water. After doing the chores, they were also allowed to watch films on his laptop.

Ivy Joy Solang, one of the women who raided the perpetrator's abode, recalled that they were livid when they heard on the grapevine that he was showing pornographic films to the children and instructing girls to massage him as well. Together with two other mothers, she interrogated some children who confirmed the rumor. The children

even said that the perpetrator was inviting them one by one into his room, locked the door, and taught them how to 'massage'. Several days later, a high school student who was barely eighteen years old, got pregnant and all fingers were pointing at the perpetrator as being the father of her child.

In the past, some of the women had already attempted several times to corner and hit him but had failed to do so. When the number of testimonies of the children were increasing, the angry women stormed his rented house and captured him. Ivy recalled that they confronted him, and he did not deny his actions. Several women then tied his hands on his back and hang a placard around his neck that said, "*I am a rapist and a child molester*". Around thirty women accosted him in his parade of shame from his house to the police headquarters. They turned him over to the police and pleaded to not release him while they were filing the case in court. Three days later, however, the police had to let him go because no arrest warrant had been issued yet.

Ivy recalled that they confronted him, and he did not deny his actions. Several women then tied his hands on his back and hang a placard around his neck that said, "I am a rapist and a child molester"

As soon as he was released, he packed all his things to flee town. The owner of the house he was renting tipped the women and they trooped to his house again. His alibi was to go home to Metro Manila and get a lawyer, but the women were not fooled. They organized a night watch with all of them taking turns. They also pressured the town's mayor to have him locked up in the police station. The women were resolved to make him face his actions in court. "*It is not enough that he leaves our town because wherever he goes, he will surely repeat what he did to other children*", Ivy said.

Unfortunately, he was released again with the help of a lawyer. He took the opportunity to escape from Sagada as soon as possible. The women, however, did not relent. They stormed to social media. They posted his pictures and what he did to the children of Sagada. The call on social media to arrest him and face his case in the capital town of

Mountain Province, was widely shared. He was then arrested in Makati City and turned over to the police in Bontoc, Mountain Province. He was tried at the regional trial court for sexual assault charges including violations of the Republic Act 7610 or *“An Act of Providing for Stronger Deterrence and Special Protection against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination, and for other Purposes”*. The victims came forward and spoke out during the hearings which led to his conviction in three cases.

Ivy narrated their frustrations with the watered-down verdict, *“They wanted him to serve a maximum sentence in jail so he would no longer harm other children. However, the verdict said he will only be serving seven years at the New Bilibid Prison”*. Ivy could not explain how angry and helpless they felt at that time, thinking that he will only be locked up for seven years while their children might suffer for life because of his doing. However, Ivy, her fellow mothers and the victims were trying to look beyond the frustrating result. *“The justice served”*, Ivy said, *“may not be the best, but it will serve as a warning to all abusers of women and children. We will always be on the watch, and the next time a perpetrator is caught, we will make sure that justice will not be watered-down”*.

After he was arrested, more children, including boys, came forward with stories of sexual abuse and pointed the finger at the accused. The women facilitated the collection and documentation of their testimonies. They invited psychosocial experts from the University of the Philippines-Baguio and the Cordillera Women’s Education Action Research Center (CWEARC) to initially evaluate the victims in order to determine which support will be needed. The process of children coming forward and sharing their experiences was heartbreaking. The parents could not even stomach some of the narratives as they were so disturbing.

“may not be the best, but it will serve as a warning to all abusers of women and children. We will always be on the watch, and the next time a perpetrator is caught, we will make sure that justice will not be watered-down”

There were mothers who chose to leave their children out of the documents which Ivy and her fellow women respected. They learned that no matter how important the testimonies were to strengthen the case against the sexual abuser, the readiness and perseverance of both the children and their parents to come forward in public was more important. In the end, out of the twenty identified victims, only nine allowed to document their testimonies and less than nine showed up regularly for court. One of the challenges in pushing the case until the end was the lack of resources to cover the cost of food and transportation during the hearings. The women therefore tried to pool as many resources as possible so the victims, their parents and the support groups could attend all the hearings.

After the trial, several other sexual abuse cases were forthcoming. Relatives of victims reached out to the women group instead of the government agency that is supposed to protect people’s welfare, especially women and children. There was no doubt that the women group had gained popularity and respect.

It all started with a mother’s instinct to protect her children and it turned out to be a full-blown municipal wide organization with the objective to educate communities on the rights of women and children and to empower them to act against all forms of abuse. *“The situation of the victims has to end by building the courage and solidarity within and among communities”*, Ivy said. They called themselves Inayan Watch. *Inayan* is one of the traditional values among the Kankana-eyes, the Indigenous Peoples from Mountain Province. It means ‘the abhorrence of any act that inflicts harm to people or the common good’.

Inayan Watch is also a call for action among the community members to speak out against abuse. *“Silence”*, they said, *“should be abhorred when it comes to upholding the rights of women and children”*. They realized that community silence has prolonged and aggravated the abuses committed by child offenders. The women admitted that silence has become the norm in town when it comes to violence against women and children. The feeling of shame and a lack of solidarity breed silence. Hence, some families chose silence over becoming the subject of gossip or

the public topic of conversation. The goal of Inayan Watch is to quash this norm. They want to instill that it is not shameful to speak the truth, especially if it serves justice. The women iterate, *“It is shameful and detestable to rape or assault a human being. It is noble to break the silence and pave the way for justice”*.



❖ Inayan Watch meeting
(source: Inayan Watch).

Since Inayan Watch was formed, its members have been going around the communities organizing discussions on women’s Human Rights, Indigenous People’s rights and other people’s rights. They have been reaching out to several regional and provincial

organizations, alliances and individuals who are experts on these rights issues, in order to be a resource person during these community discussions. Next to their educational and empowering activities, they also assist the child abuse victims with their psychosocial processes.

Their collective strength in town is undeniable. Inayan Watch, however, needs wider support and solidarity not only among the people of Sagada, but the entire Mountain Province and Cordillera Region. During their first General Assembly, the members agreed to become an allied member organization of *Binnadang*, a provincial alliance of women’s organizations, and also *Innabuyog*, an alliance of Indigenous Women’s organizations in the Cordillera. These alliances have been on their side and guiding them when they were still contemplating to form Inayan Watch. Ivy Joy Solang is the current chairperson of the organization. She envisions that one day, Inayan Watch will no longer be needed. She longs for the day that the community solidarity will be strong and the power to fight back any form of abuse will be in place.

*Written by Alma B. Sinumlag,
Philippine Task Force for Indigenous Peoples Rights (TFIP)*

2.2. Kanda Pramongkit: A struggle for legal recognition

Name: Kanda Promongkit

Ethnicity: Urak Lawoi

Address: Laem Tukkae village, Phuket, Thailand



❖ Kanda Promongkit

Kanda Pramongkit is an Indigenous Women leader from Laem Tukkae village located in southern Thailand. She is a voice for her Urak Lawoi community. Unfortunately, she lost her husband two years ago. He was really supportive and very dedicated to fight against inequality. She has two grown up daughters and does not have to worry about them while fighting for Human Rights issues. Her struggles to support her community

concern land rights, limited access to government services, gender inequality, environmental issues and income generation for women. She is the current village health volunteer President and used to be the assistant of the village headman for nineteen years. Moreover, she is a real leader and a driving force for her community, particularly concerning land rights issues for the Urak Lawoi of Laem Tukkae village.

Laem Tukkae village is home to an ancient civilization of Urak Lawoi people who are known as the Sea gypsies or Chao Lay, which means ‘sea people’. The Urak Lawoi live on Thai and Myanmar coastal islands located in the Andaman Sea. The habitat of the Urak Lawoi in Thailand is usually found around Phuket, Pang Nga, Ranong, Krabi and Satun. Laem Tukkae village, about 200 years old, is in Phuket province on the southeast end of Siray island. Currently, there are about 336 households with a total population of almost 1,600 people. Most villagers earn their living from inshore fishing. They catch coastal fish, seashells, jellyfish and pearls. Depending on the season, they also do farm work. Normally, the Urak Lawoi prefer to stay away from other

people. They love to live a peaceful life and isolate themselves from social crowds. Their habitat is usually in a very remote area along the coastline. Due to the remote location of their villages, they have no access to quality healthcare, education and other basic amenities.

The Urak Lawoi struggle because they were not recognized as one of the Thai Indigenous Peoples. Most of the Thai population has access to government services but because they were stateless, children were not allowed access to basic education, women and elderly had only limited access to quality healthcare service and they had no right to vote. Kanda and her team therefore decided to fight for their people. At that time Kanda was a village headman assistant, she was determined to do something as there were only a few people who had a proper Thai ID card. She helped to register names of all the people who did not have an ID card yet. With her help more than one hundred people obtained a Thai ID card. Unfortunately, there are still a few others who couldn't get an ID card because they moved to Laem Tukkae later than the others. Nonetheless, Kanda has never stopped fighting for those people as she always believes in equal rights for everyone. She supported to register their name so they could at least have access to quality healthcare service from the government. Because of Kanda's struggle, all the villagers now have access to healthcare service, but the fight to be legally recognized as one of the Thai Indigenous Peoples is still ongoing.

She helped to register names of all the people who did not have an ID card yet. With her help more than one hundred people obtained a Thai ID card.



However, those are not the only obstacles the Urak Lawoi are facing. The growing tourism in Phuket also hugely affecting their daily lives. Usually the men used to go fishing along the coast and the women collected forage on the seashore, now most of the seashore belongs to private entrepreneurs or have become National Parks, villagers cannot go fishing anymore and their livelihood right has been seriously affected. The area of their fisheries has been limited and can't access their ancient's graveyard anymore. Kanda said, *"There is another obstacle that currently affects all Laem Tukkae peoples' life, it is a business and Human Rights problem. Private entrepreneurs are taking over Urak Lawoi ancient's land, including their ancient's graveyard. Government has also declared their home area as a National Park. The villagers are struggling and have become desperate. There is no one to support or help them to fight their way through this matter"*. Therefore, Kanda and her team decided to fight for their land rights. They have tried to search for evidence to prove that the villagers were settled at Laem Tukkae before the declaration as a National Park. Also, the Urak Lawoi are sea people, they respect every single area of the island and it is not in their nature to claim ownership of land. Outsiders moved to the island, secretly registered the land on their names to get a legal land title, and secretly sold the land to private entrepreneurs. So, many families were sued and forced to leave their home without any other place to go. Their home no longer belongs to them and their ancient's graveyards now belong to someone else.





Kanda has attended many trainings organized by IWNT and Manushaya Foundation. They supported and encouraged her to become an Indigenous Women leader and an Indigenous People Human Rights defender. Kanda said, "Currently five families have been sued to leave their land as their home is located on a private entrepreneur's land".

Even though she had no support from other local leaders, Kanda has never lost faith in her fight for Human Rights. She looked for help from outside sources such as Indigenous Women Networks in Thailand (IWNT), Networks of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand (NIPT), National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (NHRC) and Manushaya Foundation. Kanda has attended many trainings organized by IWNT and Manushaya Foundation. They supported and encouraged her to become an Indigenous Women leader and an Indigenous People Human Rights defender. Kanda said, "Currently five families have been sued to leave their land as their home is located on a private entrepreneur's land". In early January 2019, these five families have received a notice letter to leave their land. With legal support from Manushaya foundation, Kanda and her community have drafted a letter to oppose the allegations against the five families. Also, the NHRC examined the complaints and prepared a report of the possible Human Rights violations. At this moment, the case is still ongoing and yet not brought to a conclusion whether the Urak Lawoi have to leave their homeland or not.

"Every time when I hear about a community member who is desperate and struggling with the same obstacles and no government officer wants to support. I am encouraged to continue to fight for myself and my people. It is not easy for me as my Thai is not so strong, I cannot read or write Thai and I speak only broken Thai."

Kanda added, "As village volunteers, my team and I visit our community members as much as possible, especially the ones with health problems. We have a chance to talk to them personally and listen to their concerns on land rights issues. Now their house no longer belongs to them and every single space of Laem Tukkae village belongs to someone from outside the community. Children have to stop their education after grade six or nine because they have no money to continue their higher education and the high school is quite far from the community. Because the access to the seashores is blocked for fishing, they have no income to pay for their children's school expenses and even their daily living. Moreover, the children, the elderly and the sick are not able to pay for their own medication". She continues, "Every time when I hear about a community member who is desperate and struggling with the same obstacles and no government officer wants to support. I am encouraged to continue to fight for myself and my people. It is not easy for me as my Thai is not so strong, I cannot read or write Thai and I speak only broken Thai. So sometimes it discourages me and makes me feel to keep quiet, but those are just thoughts in my mind. I would never leave anyone behind, even if there is no support from the local government. I will never lose my faith in justice."

Next to this, Kanda also volunteers to teach the traditional language to the kids and adolescents of her community, so it would be preserved. She teaches the Urak Lawoi language once a week. It is only a speaking class because Urak Lawoi does not have a written form. She really enjoys every single moment she can spend with the new generation of Urak Lawoi. She believes that one day the Urak Lawoi will be legally recognized and have land rights to their ancient's land so they can live a peaceful life.

Written by Anonymous

2.3. Chanchana Chakma: A Change Maker

Name: Chanchana Chakma

Ethnicity: Chakma

Address: Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh



❖ Chanchana Chakma delivering her speech at a civil society conference program (source: Gilbert Dareng).

This story is about Chanchana Chakma. No law or boundary can stop her fighting spirit. Her life has been an ongoing struggle; every step has been met with resistance; every stage of her life has been tough. But she is like a restless horse; she has no fear. Every step has been meaningful to her.

Before starting her story, having an overview of the political

context of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is important. The CHT have been colonized firstly by the British (1860-1946), then by the Pakistani (1947-1970) and eventually by the Bengalis (1971-Present). Another cause of many difficulties for the mountain people of the CHT was the construction of the Kaptai Dam in 1962. The government of Pakistan has displaced as many as 100,000 native people because of this hydro power project. The displaced people didn't receive satisfactory compensation from the government which resulted in a widespread resentment. Consequently, thousands of people fled to India. After the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the government only recognized the Bengali culture and language. They automatically designated all citizens of Bangladesh as Bengalis. The country's founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman expressed that the ethnic groups of the Hill Tracts are citizens of Bangladesh and should therefore have the Bengali identity. He did not recognize the ethnic identities and cultures of the non-Muslim and non-Bengali people of Bangladesh. After his proposal, disenchantment grew amongst the people of the mountains.

The lack of Human Rights, injustice and deprivation became unacceptable for the CHT native people. Chakma politician and representative of the CHT, Manabendra Narayan Larma who was elected in the 1970 election, went to the Bangladesh parliament to seek autonomy and recognition for the rights of the Indigenous Peoples. On 15 February 1972, Larma and some other people founded the *Parbatya Chattagram Jana Shanghatti Samiti* (PCJSS) as a united political organization for all native people and tribes. The armed wing of the PCJSS, the *Santi Bahini* was specially established to resist government policies. In 1977, they had launched their first attack on a Bangladesh military convoy. Unfortunately, due to factionalism within PCJSS, Larma's position was weakened and he was assassinated on 10 November 1983. After that, his younger brother, Jotirindrio Bodhiprio Santu Larma, became the new leader of PCJSS.

Chakma politician and representative of the CHT, Manabendra Narayan Larma who was elected in the 1970 election, went to the Bangladesh parliament to seek autonomy and recognition for the rights of the Indigenous Peoples.

Between 1978 and 1986, during the regime of President Ziaur Rahman and Lieutenant General Hussain Muhammad Ershad, more than 400,000 Bengali migrated to the CHT causing the Bengali settlers to become the majority (59%) of the CHT population. From 1971 until 1997 (before the peace accord) there have been a total of twelve massacres in the CHT committed by the Bangladesh military and Bengali settlers. During that period, more than 5,000 Indigenous People died. Moreover, it is estimated that between 1981 and 1994 about 2,500 Indigenous Women were raped by the Bangladesh armed forces and Bengali settlers. After twenty-four years of conflict, a peace accord was formally signed on 2 December 1997, by the leader of the PCJSS and the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed. However, until today the government has not respected the peace accord. This is why the CHT leaders and activists are still working and fighting for the fulfillment of the peace accord demands.



❖ International Indigenous Day, 2017 (source: Priota Tripura).

Chanchana Chakma was born on the 20th May 1985, in a farmer family in Talлчаara village of Bhushanchora, Bangladesh. She is the daughter of late Dinachandra Chakma and Modina Devi Chakma with two brothers and two sisters. When she was five years old, she moved in with her aunt's family in Mijoram Province located in neighboring India. Before she was born, four massacres took place in different areas in the CHT. It was a very precarious time because the army tortured, killed, burned down houses and villages, and raped women and girls. Her father also had to flee to the jungle because he would have been killed if the army would have caught him. Those days, almost all men and boys from the village were hiding in the jungle. This situation made her father decide to send her to a neighboring country. At that time her parents had two children, Chanchana and her little brother. She continued her education in India and during her school life she was a meritorious student.

However, she believed that without struggle nothing can be improved in her life. In a meantime, she observed that the life of the Indigenous People did not change after the peace accord. Where she was living, the numbers of Bengali settlers were increasing significantly day by day.

Whole areas of the CHT continued to be affected by brutal genocides for a long time. Until today, no-one has been brought to justice for these crimes. After the peace accord in 1997, her parents thought they would get freedom. So Chanchana came back to Bangladesh from India. Her father told her, “There is no need to go to India again because we are free now”. But that was a big lie from the Shek Hasina government to the CHT Indigenous Peoples. When she came back to Bangladesh, she enrolled in Barkal High school in class eight. At that time, she did not know how to speak and read the Bengali language. However, she believed that without struggle nothing can be improved in her life. In a meantime, she observed that the life of the Indigenous Peoples did not change after the peace accord. Where she was living, the numbers of Bengali settlers were increasing significantly day by day.



❖ Certificate receiving day of DTP, 2012, Timor-Leste (source: Joana).

Since her school life she was very well acquainted with the political situation in the CHT. Her father often told her the story about how their village was affected by the genocide. It happened before she was born in Tallchara village of Bhushonchora union, Borkalupojila of Rangamati District. The military and Bengali settlers killed more than 300 people, raped women and girls, and burned down a lot of houses. They also confiscated the land of many Indigenous People. She therefore decided to become a defender. In the year 1998, she was introduced at school to Pahari Chatro Parishod (PCP) founded after the Longodu massacre in 1992 as a division of the PCJSS in the CHT and the Hill Women's Federation (HWF) that was established on 8 March 1988 to unite women and establish women's rights, but also to improve collaboration among different communities and create a women's network. Following her cousin's request, she attended HWF meeting and became the youngest member of HWF.

She became a leader when she was selected for the first time as a Secretary of the Bhushonchora union HWF branch. At first, she was quite unfamiliar with the activity of HWF, but she said, "if I don't taste, how can I know if it is bitter or sweet". This deep belief made her an active female leader when women involvement in politics was not common.

The military and Bengali settlers killed more than 300 people, raped women and girls, and burned down a lot of houses. They also confiscated the land of many Indigenous People. She therefore decided to become a defender.

Day by day she was growing up and building relations amongst Indigenous Peoples, youngsters and women. She was promoted to Committee Member of the Barkal Sub-District in 2000 and at the same time, she became District Secretary in the Central Committee of Rangamati. Her network was increasing significantly, and one day she was called by the great leader MN Santu Larma to join the Rangamati head office of HWF. She served as central President from 2008 until 2016.

After the peace accord, the people from the CHT thought they would get their lands back that were occupied by the Bengali settlers. They also thought that their fundamental and political rights would be respected, but it turned out to be a big lie from the Bangladesh government to the Indigenous Peoples. So, the situation of the CHT began to worsen again. During her time with HWF, she persuaded many women and young girls to join HWF to raise their voice and protest against the rape, murder, abuse and kidnap cases. She visited women survivors in the remote villages. Followers appeared in the crowd who were excited to hear her voice when she delivered her speech against the injustice and violence. She has gained great acceptance from fourteen ethnic communities in the CHT. Her belief is "no matter who you are, every person has God-gifted rights to breathe and enjoy life".

During her time with HWF, she persuaded many women and young girls to join HWF to raise their voice and protest against the rape, murder, abuse and kidnap cases.

Next to this she has also graduated from Rangamati Degree College and decided to form a network to link all women together in order to protect and promote Indigenous Women's rights in the country. Her work spread out from the mountains to the plains. She became known as a serious Human Rights defender. As recognition for her work, she was awarded in 2010 from the Bangladesh Mohila Porishad (BMP) a Women's Human Rights organization. She joined the Bangladesh Indigenous Women's Network (BIWN), a network with almost fifty-four ethnic women groups who come together to protest and protect the Indigenous Women's Rights in 2011 and became the Member Secretary at BIWN after two years.

She had to struggle a lot with herself, her family and colleagues, and against patriarchy. Her long journey of activism has not been easy. She had to overcome many obstacles because of her gender and ethnic identity. When she joined HWF as a young activist, a lot of village people were not happy because they believed that women should not be involved in politics and feared that other girls would be influenced.

She was even threatened with death, but she was unstoppable. Her parents also discouraged her at first as they were influenced by their neighbors but later her parents were convinced on the importance of her activism. She had witnessed a lot of instances of communal violence against Indigenous Women and girls during her childhood. Many times, the Bengali settlers raped, killed and tortured Indigenous Peoples and burned down their houses in front of her eyes. They also occupied their land. All this gave her the strength to become a fighter for her community. When she was involved in PCJSS and HWF she also had to struggle. Nonetheless, she could handle every situation and maintain every relationship in her pathway.



❖ Collaboration at a Training program of BIWN (Source: Gilbert Dareng).

Chanchana Chakma is a determined and peaceful woman and has ability to handle every challenge. The last eight years she has not only been working in the field, but also on a more formal level, by giving lectures. She participated in protest against discrimination and the violation of Human Rights. As activist, she dealt with different Human Rights violations cases such as human trafficking. This is an excerpt of a successful story; *“Her name was X and belong to poor family. She was married at age of 16 and moved to Chittagong city, Bangladesh to work in a garment factory with her husband. One day, a Bengali friend of her husband offered her a new job in Gazipur, Dhaka. Her husband was impressed and after seven months, she took a bus with that man to go to Gazipur in order to get the better job. But it was a trap to traffic her to India. The incident happened on the 15 August 2015. When they arrived in Dhaka, she ate a narcotic mixed with fruits and bread offered by that man. Eight hours later, when it was nearly 6 pm, she had arrived at Ishordi of Pabna District. One of Indigenous passengers on*

the bus noticed that the girl was in danger, so the passenger informed the highway traffic police. Initially the police told her husband and the Indigenous person to call Chanchana. She talked with the girl, listened to her full story and provided moral support. The police made a report on the case and Chanchana went to Ishordi together with a legal lawyer in order to support the girl. On the second day, the Bengali man was arrested and thrown into prison. On the 17 August the girl and her husband travelled back to Dhaka.”



❖ Anniversary of the Women's Council (Source: Sahanaz Zaman).

Over the period she developed different skills such as providing trainings or organizing seminars and workshops on advocacy, gender, leadership, women empowerment and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) goals. She graduated from Dhaka International University with a Master of Arts (MA) in Sociology in 2013 and graduated with a Bachelor of Laws from Green University in 2016. She is recognized internationally as a strong Human Rights defender and has represented Bangladesh Indigenous Women at several platforms. Between 2009 to 2019, she has visited and amplified the voices of Indigenous Women in many different Human Rights, Indigenous Peoples Human Rights and Women's Rights based events at different level. She initiated relation and solidarity among mainstream civil societies, political persons, reporters, national women organizations, and other national or international organizations on Human rights and Indigenous Peoples' and Women's Rights issues. She wants to bring about positive change on Human Rights and Indigenous Women's and Peoples' rights around the world.

Written by Smaranika Chakma (Independent Writer and Activist)

2.4. Lwin Mar Aye:

A fighter against discrimination on Indigenous Women

Name: Lwin Mar Aye **Ethnicity:** Danu
Address: Ting Kung village, Ywar Ngan Township,
 Southern Shan State, Myanmar



❖ Lwin Mar Aye at a workshop asking questions.

Lwin Mar Aye is a twenty-three-year-old single lady from Ting Kung village, Ywar Ngan Township, Southern Shan State, Myanmar, and belongs to the Danu Indigenous Peoples. The Danu have managed to turn Ywar Ngan Township into a self-administration zone. It is the main dwelling place of most Pa-O and Danu Indigenous Peoples. For many years, Myanmar was shut down in terms of politics, economics and education. This has caused the Myanmar people to become very poor in many ways such as

lacking wealth, education, and recognition of Human Rights. On the other hand, the patriarchal system is still strong among the Myanmar people. Through empowering Indigenous Peoples and women, Lwin Mar Aye as a young and energetic lady, wants to stand up against the discrimination of women and rural people who are being looked down.

Since 2016, she has been engaged with Promotion of Indigenous and Nature Together (POINT) and learned about Free Prior Informed Consent (FPIC). This is a specific right granted to Indigenous Peoples and recognized by the UNDRIP. It allows Indigenous Peoples to give or withhold their consent to projects which may have a negative impact on their subsistence. She has also been introduced to the REDD+ program, which is a program to reduce carbon emission, and to Community Forestry (CF), which is one of the ways (and likely the only way currently in Myanmar) that allows forest dwellers the right to manage and use forests for thirty years, which can be extended.

She also learned about customary land tenure and gender issues, and has received training on advocacy, leadership, and assessment and documentation of traditional skills. She is now affiliated with Green Rights Organization and actively working for Indigenous Peoples' communities and women in Ywar Ngan Township, Southern Shan State.

She also learned about customary land tenure and gender issues, and has received training on advocacy, leadership, and assessment and documentation of traditional skills.

Subsequently, she shared her knowledge and trained young women and community members on REDD+, CF, FPIC, gender issues and climate change impact. As a result, she gained the trust and respect from the Danu community. They started to consult and follow her advice when they had a problem. For example, when a young married woman from Ting Kung village was abused by her husband, she consulted and sought advice from Lwin Mar Aye. With support from Lwin Mar Aye, she reported the case to the village authorities and the husband was fined for his offense.

She is not only invited by her own village Ting Kung but also by other villages from Ywar Ngan Township such as Kyuak Taw, Taphanpin and Phekin village, for training on CF when the villagers wanted to know CF establishment and implementation. She provided technical support on how to establish CF, and via Green Right Organization, she supported villagers to draw a map of the intended area of CF establishment. She became more active and recognized. She was panelist during a 'regional Learning Workshop on Indigenous Women and Customary Land Tenure' organized by POINT at Inya Lake hotel, from the 28-30 August 2018. The government, CSOs and local NGOs, along with many Indigenous Women from different parts of the country participated in the workshop. They shared their experience and traditional knowledge on the protection and conservation of forests and land management and advocated for the recognition of the traditional way of land ownership rights practiced by the Indigenous Peoples.

If she would continue, she would get arrested because she and her organization do not have a proper company registration to legally operate their activities.

One of the significant cases, she was involved and successfully supported her community members, was on defending of their land rights. A mining company, called Wongpi, claimed its rights to start a mining project in Ting Kung village. They presented the acceptance signatures from more than fifteen villagers. However, they had manipulated those signatures from villagers who worked for the company as daily laborers and had signed to acknowledge the receipt of their wages. Moreover, they neither had information nor properly consulted with the workers as well as all community members on the project.

Lwin Mar Aye as heard about the project, went to her village and explained the community members about the requirements of FPIC and the risks, advantages and disadvantages of the mining project. She organized three meetings with the community, the village authorities and the mining company in order to share community's perspectives on the project start up. When the community refused to provide their consent, she wrote a letter of objection to the Shan State government and Nay Pyi Taw government office on the 6 December 2018. Now they are still waiting for the reply from the government, but the mining company has already withdrawn and stopped the implementation of the project.

Through the work of Lwin Mar Aye her community has gained knowledge and has become aware about the FPIC as well as the possible consequences of the mining project. However, even though the mining company has stopped the implementation of the project, she still has been threatened and frightened by the local authorities and the company. The local authorities have asked her to stop doing what she has been doing. If she would continue, she would get arrested because she and her organization do not have a proper company registration to legally operate their activities. Likewise, an employee of the Wongpi mining company once pointed a knife at her and threatened that she would get sexually abused.



❖ Lwin Mar Aye and Mu Htet Myat participating in a panel discussion.

Notwithstanding these challenges, she has made an agreement with the village leaders (village administration) that she would share the information in any events. Through these regular contacts with the village leaders, she has gained their trust, respect and protection which has empowered her to continue her initiatives regardless she has faced threats of death and imprisonment. She has been acknowledged and recognized as a young women leader. There is still a lot to be changed and done so that women can get explicit leadership roles in the community, and discrimination and Human Rights abuse against women and Indigenous Peoples' communities will be stopped. This is why the young and energetic Lwin Mar Aye is determined to continue her work of fighting against discrimination of women and Human Rights abuses on Indigenous Peoples' communities.

Written by POINT



Indigenous Women Defending their Collective Land Rights

- 3.1 Janice 'Anis' Abmam, Philippines
- 3.2 Nan Nge Nge, Myanmar
- 3.3 Dam Bang, Cambodia
- 3.4 Ping Chamroaun, Cambodia
- 3.5 Malti Tirkey, India
- 3.6 Maslah Rampado, Malaysia

3.1. Janice 'Anis' Abmam: A Warrior

Name: Janice 'Anis' Abmam

Ethnicity: Isnag

Address: Sierra Madre, Philippines

She is not a chief but surely a warrior. Her name is Janice 'Anis' Abmam. I know her as the Igorot woman among the Dumagat-Remontado tribes in Sierra Madre, Philippines who fiercely opposes the proposed New Centennial Water Source (NCWS) project funded by the Chinese Official Development Assistance (ODA).

We first met in December 2017 during the *Paskuhan sa Tribu* (Christmas in the Tribal Community) organized by *Katribu Kalipunan ng Katutubong Mamamayan ng Pilipinas* and *Sandiwa*, a network of national minority advocates. On the way to the venue, our guide, knowing that I speak Ilocano, could not stop talking about her. One of the many things that 'Tatay' has told me, was that she is from Apayao. She studied at a Baptist bible school and she fell in love and ran off with her Dumagat husband, Badi. Like other heros, she might have thought of living happily ever after with Badi but the Philippine Government just would not let them. Not in Sierra Madre, not in any far away Indigenous Peoples' land.

Under the current President's 'Build, Build, Build' economic policy, massive infrastructure and energy projects are being

set up which destroy ancestral domains and territories of Indigenous Peoples across the country. Mega dam projects that were halted due to people's opposition back in the eighties, such as the Chico, Balog-Balog, and Laiban dams, are currently being revived. In the provinces of Rizal and Quezon, a series of dams are now being built which will displace at least nine large Indigenous communities. About 31,000 people mostly belonging to the Dumagat-Remontado Indigenous Peoples, who will lose more than 20,000 hectares of their ancestral lands to the Kaliwa, Kanan, and Laiban dams.

One of the many things that 'Tatay' has told me, was that she is from Apayao.

During the Marcos regime, private companies were allowed from the government to plunder timber, minerals, and water resources in the Sierra Madre mountain ranges. The Indigenous farmers were pushed away from their forests. They were told they no longer owned the land and were prohibited to practice swidden farming, cut trees for firewood, hunt for food, forage medicinal plants, and practice their cultural beliefs on their sacred grounds. The government boasted about development and pushed the rightful owners further into uninhabitable areas so they could build the infamous Laiban Dam. That is when the Dumagat peoples decided to defend their natural resources against further devastation. Their collective effort pressed the government to abort the construction of the dam. Anis' own people shared the same gallant struggle at that time. Similar to the Bontoc and Kalinga communities, who were opposing the mega dam project along the Chico River, the Isnag people and their migrant neighbors succeeded to halt the construction of the Gened Dam in Dacao, Flora municipality, Apayao province. The Igorot people even burned the equipment and confiscated construction materials at the dam sites.

The government boasted about development and pushed the rightful owners further into uninhabitable areas so they could build the infamous Laiban Dam.

Four decades later, the Dumagat peoples' rights groups, and advocates for the biodiversity conservation are coming together again to oppose these infrastructure projects. They are conducting petitions and organizing mass actions, public and legislative forums, and information drive campaigns within academe. The movement effectively uses new platforms such as social media to educate the wider public about the consequences of the dam not only for the environment of the Indigenous Peoples in Sierra Madre, but also for high-risk disaster areas like Metro Manila. NCWS claims that the country needs another dam to provide potable water in the cities. While rehabilitating the pipelines of the existing dams could actually do the job, the government has signed an onerous agreement with China to receive funds for the construction of the dam and, eventually, to monopolize and privatize the water resources of the Dumagat.

The network opposing the Kaliwa, Kanan and Laiban dams have been asking the government why the rehabilitation of existing dams and watersheds are not explored. One of the cheaper, scientific options that they are proposing, is harvesting rainwater in urban communities. This will help families to get their water supply without having to pay private water companies like Maynilad Water Services Inc. and Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS). With the impact of climate change rapidly escalating, it is imperative to conserve forest areas and river systems, especially for poor Indigenous farmers who rely on natural resources for food. Evidence has shown that fresh water and food resources are depleting due to erratic climate conditions.

The ethnic Dumagat and Remontado peoples on the one hand certainly cannot afford to lose water from their irrigation system used for their small farms, however, the dam would divert all the small water sources to its reservoir during the summer. On the other hand, when the dam needs to release water during the rainy season, the communities in the periphery of the dam would be submerged and carried away downstream. The Dumagat houses are still semi-permanent structures made of bamboo and wood. Even if their houses would be made of cement, mudslides brought about by water overflow from the dam could just as easily tear them apart during a disaster.

The Dumagat people welcomed the government's promise for work and infrastructures like paved roads. Having deprived from basic education and other social services, they are sure that it would just be a temporary labor force by Chinese contractors. They cited the case of the 'Ayta Abelling' workers who were fired indiscriminately due to lack of binding job contracts between them and Guangzhi, the Chinese contractor building the Balog-Balog Dam. These fellow Indigenous Peoples did not receive the mandatory government benefits like the Social Security System (SSS), the Pag-ibig Home Development Fund and the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth). For eight months, their project supervisor also deducted a 150PHP kickback from their meager salary leaving them with almost nothing.

Anis feels strongly against the dam construction even though she was not born in Sitio Quinao. To her, this is clearly a violation of the collective rights of the Indigenous Peoples. She therefore perseveres in facilitating focus group discussions among the tribal leaders and the entire community. She also coordinates forums and dialogues at big universities in Manila so that the Dumagat leaders could educate the wider public about their stance to oppose the dam. Unlike the government, the Dumagat peoples firmly believe that the issue of development goes beyond the ownership of land. To them, nobody really owns land. It is not a property but a shared provision from *Makijapat*, their God. Preserving the environment for everybody using Indigenous practices is a legacy from their ancestors, it is their duty to prevent massive destruction of their forest land and river systems.

Unlike the government, the Dumagat peoples firmly believe that the issue of development goes beyond the ownership of land. To them, nobody really owns land. It is not a property but a shared provision from Makijapat, their God.

I knew that there was a lot more that Anis would like to share about the dam and the struggle of the Indigenous Peoples but could not wait to ask why she decided to be at the forefront and how she knows all those things that she has told me. She stopped massaging an elder colleague and looked at me intently with a shy smile and answered, "Joining rallies dressed as an ethnic Dumagat makes me proud of myself. During childhood I knew that there was a lot going on outside our small village. But that time I was not as driven as I am now because I have a daughter. I would like her to be able to run around freely in these mountains, bathe in the rivers and gather snails for our dinner when she comes home. I would like her to have a normal village life, does not have to relocate against her will and rely on the rich ecosystems for her needs just like her ancestors." "But why here?", I asked. "That one was about love. Badi's roots are here. This is where we decided to raise our family. In Apayao, it was difficult for both of us to move around with my strict parents who treat us as if we are specimens in an experiment. So, we have talked about the things that we would like to do and the roles that we would like assume to raise our daughter."

The Dumagat community in Sitio Quinao have set up the *Paedalan ne Denomagat* School with the hope that more Indigenous children will be educated and will not be deceived anymore by merchants when they sell their crops in the city. Anis is one of the volunteer teachers who holds multi-grade classes in this non-formal school. Sure enough, when Anis is out teaching the toddlers in their tribal school, Badi takes care of Iglot, their daughter. When she attends seminars and activities in Metro Manila to advocate against the dams building, Badi allows her to be herself. Given her Igorot descent, she is fondly called *Sanib* (a person from another tribal group who marries a Dumagat). However, she speaks the Dumagat language so fluently and chews betel nut effortlessly, she could not be distinguished from other Dumagat women.

Anis is one of the volunteer teachers who holds multi-grade classes in this non-formal school. Sure enough, when Anis is out teaching the toddlers in their tribal school, Badi takes care of Iglot, their daughter.

Several events after that, I heard that she has decided to be a full-time coordinator for the Dumagat Sierra Madre (DSM) which aims to unite the still semi-nomadic Dumagat communities in the Sierra Madre mountain ranges. She would like to consolidate not just the Dumagat and Remontado peoples in the province of Rizal, but also the scattered Dumagat communities in the provinces of Quezon and Aurora. Despite various Human Rights violations against Indigenous Peoples, she took it upon herself to lead the Dumagat and Remontado peoples in the Sierra Madre mountains. In the face of the difficulties, she stayed. I thought to myself, would it not be the right thing to do? While we look for something we have in common, would the struggle for a better life for our children and our communities not be the same for all of us?

*Written by Angelica Campo
Philippine Task Force for Indigenous Peoples Rights (TFIP)*

3.2. Nan Nge Nge: Indigenous Peoples' Rights promoter

Name: Nan Nge Nge

Ethnicity: Pa'O

Address: Aung Pang City, Shan State, Myanmar

Myanmar is the dwelling place of various Indigenous Peoples, or also called ethnic minorities. It is said that Myanmar is one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse countries in the world. After World War II, the country gained their independence from British colonial rule. However, there were many internal conflicts within the country and in 1962 the military junta took over power. Around that time a lot of Human Rights abuses started. In 2010, the country was transformed into a democracy.

During the military rule, politicians, anti-military and Human Rights activists were systematically persecuted and forced to leave the country. Even after the democracy, there were still a lot of Human Rights abuses. Many people were afraid to raise their voice to claim their rights or to protest against Human Rights violations. Moreover, Myanmar still has a strong patriarchal system which considers women to be inferior to men. So, women are excluded from leadership and decision-making roles and are not authorized to own land. However, in Southern Shan state, where most Pa'O and Danu Indigenous Peoples are living, there is one woman actively working as a 'Human Rights defender' and an 'Indigenous People's Rights promoter'.

A mother of five daughters, Nan Nge Nge is now 39 years old and belongs to the Pa'O ethnic group from Aung Pang City, Kalaw district, Southern Shan State, Myanmar. She was married to a man from the Chin ethnic minority in 1999. Her husband passed away in 2007 and left her with four daughters with nine years old eldest daughter and the youngest one was only one month. As a strong Indigenous woman, she managed to raise her children by using her traditional farming skills. She remarried in 2012 and had another daughter.

The year 2010 was a historical year for Myanmar as it was the first time the military junta held free and fair elections and U Thein Sein was elected as the eighth president of Myanmar. He was the former Prime Minister of the military junta. From then onwards, the people of Myanmar could enjoy freedom of expression through the media and also online, however, there were still some restrictions. Nonetheless, violations of Human Rights such as domestic sexual abuse towards women, land confiscation by development companies, deforestation and degradation of eco-systems because of mining operations or extraction of natural resources, were exposed publicly more often. Those rights abuses mostly happened in areas where Indigenous Peoples were living. Likewise, there were many projects and investments for mining operations, agriculture and tourism in Shan State which resulted in a lot of land confiscation cases.

In 2012, Nan Nge Nge noticed that people were not speaking up against these Human Rights abuses due to lack of awareness on Human Rights and the kind of judiciary protection from the existing legal framework. This made her strong will to protect Indigenous Peoples through the existing legal framework and raise the capacity of their communities so they could protect their land and rights whenever development companies would come and harm their rights or damage their livelihood. She joined the Farmers Land Union Organization (FLU) and worked together with U Win Shin Myat. She trained and built capacity such as Training of Trainers (TOT) on land law and customary tenure, gender and women rights, and environmental conservation. She has also organized workshops encouraging people to share their experiences and discuss the challenges, concerns on laws and policies implementation at community level. Further, she raised issues with parliament members in both formal and informal settings. This way Indigenous communities were able to report their challenges to the relevant government authorities and received support to defend their rights whenever the communities' rights were abused. Ever since, she has been actively working as Indigenous Women representative and an Indigenous Peoples Human Rights defender.

Occasionally she was blamed, criticized or even asked to stop interfering. They urged her to let the men do what she was doing.

Regardless of her dedication, she faced many challenges and difficulties. As mentioned earlier, Myanmar has a strong patriarchal system and does not accept women in leadership roles easily. The first challenge she faced came from her relatives and community. Occasionally she was blamed, criticized or even asked to stop interfering. They urged her to let the men do what she was doing. Many people thought that it was not appropriate for a woman to travel all the time without a man by her side. Secondly, she faced difficulties in winning trust from her community as a woman. However, she overcame all obstacles with her dedication and passion to raise awareness amongst Indigenous communities on Human Rights, laws and policies including the existing national and international legal frameworks including UNDRIP. She explained everything patiently and eventually gained the trust from her community and other Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). As women, she optimized her talent to communicate, natural patience and ability to deal calmly with many people, the government or other organizations. So, when cases of Indigenous Peoples had to be represented, as a woman, she did it more easily and adequately.

After years of struggle Nan Nge Nge now has good relationship with government authorities and many organizations, such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Metta, Land Core Group (LCG), Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG), Myanmar Center for Responsible Business (MCRB), Paungku and Civil Society Organizations (CSO) from different regions that are working on land, women, environment and Indigenous Peoples' rights. In 2015, she engaged with POINT and gained more knowledge on Indigenous Peoples and the rights under the UNDRIP and the REDD+ program. The UNDRIP provides rights such as the right to self-determination, land ownership and forest and resource management. The REDD+ program, which follows the UNDRIP, was set up in order to reduce carbon emission from forest degradation and deforestation in developing countries.

It made her realize the important interrelationship between the environment and women. She therefore became even more eager to strengthen the women's role in environment protection and promote Indigenous Peoples rights. Besides her skills and knowledge, she was able to defend and promote Indigenous Peoples rights more adequately because of her network and relationship. As a result, she was invited for a regional workshop on the implementation of REDD+ in Myanmar, participated as an Indigenous People's representative for the formation of the Safeguards Technical Working Group (Safeguards TWG), and in the preparation of Safeguard Information System (SIS). These

She provided inputs from the Indigenous Peoples' point of view and lobbied policy makers for the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in laws and policies during the workshop.

safeguards include policies and measures that address the impacts of the REDD+ program on local communities and ensure Indigenous Peoples and women rights are respect. They are considered as one of the keys for a successful

program implementation. She provided inputs from the Indigenous Peoples' point of view and lobbied policy makers for the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in laws and policies during the workshop. She also participated in the national Forum on Forestry, the strategic implementation of the CF and the workshop on Indigenous Peoples Customary Conserved Area (ICCA). Under the current forest law, protected community areas are recognized, however there is no information on how to recognize and manage these areas. Hence, the CF provides an extendable land ownership right for thirty years which is managed by the Government. The ICCA, on the other hand, is a form of land ownership which recognizes and gives full rights to the community to manage and benefit from the land without a time limitation. She actively advocated for the recognition and implementation of ICCAs and continued to raise awareness amongst Indigenous communities. In 2016, she attended the sixth 'ASEAN Social Forestry' meeting and the 'CSO Forum on Indigenous Peoples in ASEAN' in the Philippines. She met many Indigenous Peoples' leaders from ASEAN countries and learned more about other Indigenous Peoples from ASEAN.

Nan Nge Nge is dedicated and passionate to end discrimination and violations of Human Rights of Indigenous communities. She hopes, all the Indigenous Women are empowered and have equal access to education and leadership roles. She aims to support Indigenous Women to participate in leadership roles concerning land and environmental conservation, forest management, and in decision making-roles in the current formation of the federal democracy, reconciliation and peace processes with EAOs. She suggests, 'Indigenous Women should unite and work together to demand and promote their rights'.

Nan Nge Nge is dedicated and passionate to end discrimination and violations of Human Rights of Indigenous communities. She hopes, all the Indigenous Women are empowered and have equal access to education and leadership roles.

She learned from her experience that it is important for Indigenous communities to know their rights and speak up for themselves to claim those rights. She adds needs for platforms where Indigenous Peoples can exchange their experiences and lobby relevant policy makers and stakeholders. As Myanmar is in the process of reforming the country into a democracy and reconciling with EAOs for peace, it is also crucial to consider the expectations of the Indigenous Peoples' communities and learn from experiences of Indigenous Peoples from across the world.

Written by POINT

3.3. Dam Bang: A fearless Indigenous Women leader

Name: Dam Bang

Ethnicity: Bunong

Address: Kbal Romeas village, Stung Treng, Cambodia



❖ Dam Bang at the HA Office.

This story is about remarkable women who have shown her leadership in the fight for her Indigenous communities' right to land and resources.

Dam Bang is a fearless and very vocal Indigenous Women leader. She is forty-five years old and is the Indigenous Women representative in her village. She belongs to the Bunong Indigenous Peoples and lives in Kbal Romeas village, Se San district, Stung

Treng province. Her village is very near to the government planned to build the Se San 2 dam site. The government had destroyed the only bridge connecting her village with Stung Treng district to resettle her community. However, it created unexpected opposite effect and the community became stronger and more united. Dam Bang and the other Indigenous Women have been fighting against the government to claim back their land and village as they disagreed to move. As an activist, Dam Bang encourages, mobilizes and leads other women to participate in the protest against the government and their anti-Indigenous People's policy.

Before the problems of the land acquisition started, the situation of the women in Kbal Romeas was not favorable. They were not allowed to go out and take part in social activities, meetings and programs. The community used to send only the men or boys, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) never invited Indigenous Women to meetings. Even when the women raised their voice concerning issues like clean water in village meetings, the men would simply ignore them. The men

also feared that if the women would understand the law and know everything, they would not listen to the men anymore. But the women perceived that men and women complement each other. They tried to explain if they know and understand the laws and policies, and their rights, men would get more support from their wives and other women members of the family.

The men folk can now rely on them to attend social and community activities while they go out and gather food for the family. It is a positive change and helps to share the burden between men and women.

When the issue of the dam and land rights came to community, the Indigenous Peoples Organizations (IPOs) invited both men and women to the meetings and programs. Women voices were heard, and ideas were listened, and women's concerns and views were valued. Also, when the women confronted the authorities during meetings they did not fight like the men, they were leading and yielding productive and fruitful results. When the men were confronted with issues, it was observed that there was hardly any result. This is when the trend reversed, the men started to take care of the households and the women went out to attend meetings and training programs and became more active in social issues. Empowering the women from the Kbal Romeas community have made the women independent and courageous. They can take on challenges befalling their village. The men folk can now rely on them to attend social and community activities while they go out and gather food for the family. It is a positive change and helps to share the burden between men and women.

On 4 February 2017, Dam Bang and her villagers, along with activists of IPOs, non-IPOs and CSOs went to Phnom Penh to look for support from international and local organizations, and especially to consult lawyers about their situation. They marched and protested in the streets of Phnom Penh demanding to assert their rights and to ask for a meeting with government officials from the relevant Ministries. After that, they went back to their village and continued to consult with lawyers and NGOs. On 8 April 2017, the Provincial Governor convened a meeting with the villagers because of their protest in

Phnom Penh. The Governor, along with other officers from the relevant Ministries visited their village. As a result, villagers were allowed to stay in their old village and even agreed to build a connecting road to the village, a school and a health center. However, their promises did not materialize until the villagers kept reminding the Provincial Governor office about their agreement. Now they have built a road, school and health post for the villagers. The government has also built a water reservoir for agricultural purposes that can be used during the dry season. Besides this, the women of the village were able to attend a national consultation workshop for Indigenous Women about water governance. The relevant Ministry and government department were also invited.

The capacity, knowledge and awareness that the villagers received, helped them to stand up and fight for their rights, which has yielded positive results for the Bunong Indigenous Peoples. At this

Now they have built a road, school and health post for the villagers. The government has also built a water reservoir for agricultural purposes that can be used during the dry season.

moment, the Community Land Titling (CLT) is ongoing in their community. According to the CLT policy, certain land is given to the community for collective use and the ownership of such land lies with the community. Although this policy exists, its actual implementation has not been effective. Nonetheless, the villagers are expecting a positive outcome, but the timeline is not fixed which creates confusion amongst the Kbal Romeas community about the government's intention. Their struggle has also drawn the attention of Prime Minister Hun Sen who said on the radio and television that the Kbal Romeas community should be allowed to stay in their current village because they would like to live on their traditional community land and protect it. This has strengthened and boosted the community to fight for their land.

Nonetheless, the villagers are expecting a positive outcome, but the timeline is not fixed which creates confusion amongst the Kbal Romeas community about the government's intention.



❖ Dam Bang during an interview at the HA Office.

Despite this success, they are still under government surveillance and outsiders are not allowed to visit the community to learn about their experiences as the government is afraid that it will inspire other communities to fight for their rights. The challenge they face while working for Indigenous People's rights, is that the sub-national government officials do not understand their rights. The Indigenous Peoples have special rights under UNDRIP and various rights are conferred to Indigenous Peoples such as the right to claim land, resources and territories. The lack of knowledge from the government still creates problems up until today. Their lands are forcefully taken away, and their right to education, culture and language are denied. Indigenous Peoples are not treated in a similar way as the people in the mainstream society. They cannot advocate or attend training programs openly, and all their activities are kept under government surveillance. Dam Bang opined 'government officials should also be a part of the capacity building programs and aware on Indigenous People's rights and their needs'. This closer interaction with government officials will minimize the conflict situation and create a better environment for activists to work and promote mutual trust.

Written by Dharmodip Basumatary

3.4. Ping Chamroaun: A frontline leader

Name: Ping Chamroaun

Ethnicity: Brao

Address: Pyang village, Ratanakiri, Cambodia

Ping Chamroaun is an active, energetic and devoted activist. She is deeply respected and followed by the people in her community. She attended school until grade nine and equipped with just a limited educational background. Despite she looks too young to shoulder the responsibilities she is carrying; she has a big zeal to serve her community. She aims to develop her community from its current shambled stage into a self-reliant village whilst still respecting her community's traditions. She would like her people to have access to clean water, forests, natural resources and education. Her overall purpose is to create better living conditions for her community, and even more so, a dignified life as Indigenous Peoples.



❖ Ping Chamroaun at the Sesan riverbank.

She ruled with empathy and love but reigned over her enemies with an iron fist. She united all the Indigenous Peoples of the area who were fighting amongst each other and since then there have been no more fights.

She belongs to the Brao ethnic minority and lives in a village called Pyang, some fifty kilometers from Ratanakiri provincial town. There is no well-constructed road to her village, there is just mountains of sand and soil that serve as a road. The nearest road is thirty kilometers away from her village, which makes the lives of the villagers very miserable in both the rainy and dry seasons. The government's policy is to build a road at the rate of two kilometers per year. So, the completion of an all-weather road can be expected only after fifteen years. Ping has been wading through these sandy paths since her childhood. Now she is twenty-nine and a mother of two children; a boy and a girl. Apart from her service to the community, she runs a small shop at her house to supplement her income. The villagers consider her as *Yak Nang Ra*. According to their legend, *Yak Nang Ra* was a powerful or 'big' woman. She ruled with empathy and love but reigned over her enemies with an iron fist. She united all the Indigenous Peoples of the area who were fighting amongst each other and since then there have been no more fights. So, it is tremendous honor for Ping to be compared with *Yak Nang Ra*.

The people from her village have been confronted with many issues. Among them is the water crisis caused by drought, however, floods have taken an equal toll on the village. Both situations affect women and children the most. Every year, the water released from the Yali Falls Dam in Vietnam, plays havoc with the lives of the people living downstream. In the rainy season, the reservoir needs to sluice out the surging water and this sudden release of huge volumes of water creates massive floods and affects the people living along the riverbank. The sudden water release without prior information or warning causes a lot of damage to the lives and properties of the people living downstream in Cambodia. In 2007, 2008 and September 2009 there have been massive floods due to sudden water releases.

Moreover, a study conducted by a government agency has revealed that about four years ago, 952 people who were living in villages along the Se San river in Ratanakiri province, have lost their lives because of a change in the water quality. The water was found to be contaminated with a chemical substance from the chemical fertilizer mostly used by plantation companies situated along the river in Vietnam and Cambodia. These areas get flooded easily during the rainy season, the flood water washes away the chemical and poisonous substances into the river and affects the potability of the water. Additionally, mining companies also release contaminated water into river. According to the survey, about fifty-nine villages from fifteen communities from four districts were affected. Therefore, they are protesting unitedly against the building of more hydroelectric dams on the Se San river as the government planned to build more dams at the border of Ta Veaeng and Veun Sai district in northeastern Cambodia after the construction of the Se San 2 dam.

These areas get flooded easily during the rainy season, the flood water washes away the chemical and poisonous substances into the river and affects the potability of the water. Additionally, mining companies also release contaminated water into river. According to the survey, about fifty-nine villages from fifteen communities from four districts were affected.

Ping Chamroaun, together with other members of the Brao ethnic minority from Pyang village, mobilized the villagers to fight against the government's move to confiscate their land. They demanded to declare an area on the bank of the Se San river as CF and should be a protected area for their water resources and fishing. Ping and her co-activists conducted an in-depth study on the community beliefs, which revealed that their ancestors previously used the area as a sacred place. The sacred connection with nature and spiritual beliefs was fast eroding over the period, so the villagers wanted to go back to their roots, revive their old traditions and continue rituals. The study helped them to better understand their culture, traditions and spiritual connection with nature. Consequently, they started to worship their ancestors and follow their old traditions.

Ping Chamroaun believes that it is the women's responsibility to protect that area. She says, "We have started celebrating our ancestors again since 2013 through offerings. After the (water governance) project started in 2017, we aware the community about community's sacred land and want to use it for community based eco-tourism to promote our identity, culture, Indigenous food and handicrafts". They had conducted a detailed study before developing the area from a sacred site into a community based eco-tourism place. They used the information from the study to encourage the people to protect the area. The villagers demanded with government that they need this area for their community to improve the living conditions and develop income generation sources. The government accepted the status and allowed to use it as a community land. Then the villagers started community based eco-tourism through selling Indigenous food, handicrafts and clothes. This endeavor was important for women and children as the women could generate an income which could be used for sending the children to school.



❖ Ping Chamroaun with a villager.



❖ Ping Chamroaun with village elders and Dharmodip.

According to Ping, villagers were trained and built capacity by the Highlander Association (HA), 3SPN (Sesan, Sekong and Srepok Protection Network) and other organizations before running the community based eco-tourism. This has enhanced the capacity, especially of the women, to access water and it improved their knowledge for processing food and developed their leadership and management skills. Ping also had the opportunity to visit Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai province in Thailand to see success stories of villages about water governance and community-based development. She also visited communities at the Vietnamese and Cambodian border who were

successful with community based eco-tourism. Ping admits that she has learned a lot from exchanging and sharing ideas. She used her knowledge to work with her community, empower them, increase their income for their children and the next generation, and develop the area to improve their water management. They have taken measures to protect the river water from pollution by using natural manure instead of chemical fertilizer, prohibiting the rearing of pigs and cattle at the riverbank, and maintaining the borewell and tubes in a good condition.

Ping has learned that the endeavors to work with member organizations are the last hope to protect their land from private investors, outsiders and other development work that could impact her community. If they fail to do so, she worries that they will not be able to protect their water, sacred land, culture and identity. She is now connected with the HA, Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Association (CIPA), Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Organization (CIPO), Cambodia Indigenous Youth Association (CIYA), 3SPN and Bandos Koma. With her actions and commitment to help her community she will become a revered and respected women leader in the days to come, that is for sure. As she has received capacity building, skill development and empowerment training on water governance, land rights and many other issues related to Indigenous Peoples, she took on further responsibility to empower fellow activists and villagers. She plays a pivotal role in mobilizing people to protest and demonstrate, be it against the government or private companies. In those protest activities, she leads the villagers from the front.

Written by Dharmodip Basumatary

3.5. Malti Tirkey: An Unstoppable Leader

Name: Malti Tirkey

Ethnicity: Oraon

Address: Gholeng, Chhattisgarh state, India



❖ Malti addressing the gathering on the occasion of World Indigenous Peoples Day, 2018.

I was born into an Oraon Indigenous family on 10 July 1978 in Gholeng village, Jashpur district, Chhattisgarh state, India. Even before I was born, the financial condition of my family was not sound. My father used to work as a gardener in a Church. He eked out a living from his wage, which was paid in cash (Rs.18-20 per week or less than half a dollar) or paid-in-kind such as paddy and rice. My mother worked as a laborer on someone else's field. We are four siblings in my family, two brothers, one sister and me. Being the eldest child, I had to look after my younger siblings and do household chores besides going to school. I did my primary schooling at the Holy Cross School, Gholeng. During my studies, I fell in love with a man and became a teenage mother before I married. I could not continue my education and decided to marry the man whom I loved immensely. However, my husband's family refused to accept me and my child stating that the father of the child was someone else. Due to the pressure from his parents he refused to accept me. At that time, I decided to live in his house expecting they would accept me slowly. But they refused and started to abuse me verbally and physically. I planned to give birth and raise the child all by myself, if my in-law's family would not accept us.



❖ Malti Tirkey and Mamta Kujur interacting with a victim's mother at Jarhapath Village.

At a very young age, I became a mother of a beautiful girl. She became the strength of my life and my purpose of my living. Sadly, my daughter and I were not accepted by my in-laws. I approached the village council to sort out the matter, but my in-laws were adamant on their decision and continued to abuse us. Finally, I decided to file a complaint at the police station. Having faith in the country's justice system, village council and my conviction, I fought in court despite of repeated threats and pressure from my in-laws. Eventually, I won the case after over a year of running around from pillar to post. My in-laws were obliged to accept me and my daughter. However, the troubles and difficulties did not end there. I was not provided the clothes, food, soap-oil and other amenities. My alcoholic in-laws often abused me verbally and physically continuously. We therefore decided to stay away from them. We were given a small room. By doing labor work, we nurtured and brought up our four children while living in that small room. I used to take my children to the fields when I went out to work. Some days we did not find any work and went to bed with an empty stomach. So, we had to face extreme poverty and hunger. Through our hard work, we could raise and educate our children.

Since my childhood I already had some leadership traits. Around the age of twenty, I was a community leader in the village and associated with *Mahila Sangh*, a women's association of the Catholic Church. I became the president of the *Mahila Sangh* of my village in 1992. I served in various capacities as a *Mitanin*, as the women's awareness programme in Gholeng, the governmental Health Department, and the welfare activities of the Mission Hospital. *Mitanin*, which literally means 'friends', is a health sector reform programme in Chhattisgarh state. Under this programme over 60,000 women have been trained as community health workers to give health support at the village level. As community health workers, we worked together with women and carried out social work. We advocated liquor bans, formed and strengthened village-level organizations, increased health awareness on vaccinations among others, created awareness and encouraged people to participate in the *Gram Sabha* (village council meeting).

Under this programme over 60,000 women have been trained as community health workers to give health support at the village level.

At first, I started with anti-alcohol campaigns in my own village. There were around forty-five families in the village, belonging to different communities and religions. All depend on forest products, day labor and small agricultural products for their livings. Many families lived in acute poverty or were impoverished and were addicted to alcohol during those days. I noticed that many people, particularly men, used to sell their rice or paddy to buy liquor. There were times when rest of the family members did not have enough rice to eat and whole family had to starve. While women were working on the field to earn a little bit from selling paddy, the men were wasting on liquor. They also abused their wives and children. I could not stay still and wanted to do something, so I decided to mobilize the women of my village. We had a community meeting, and the women from all communities joined hands to ban the alcohol selling in the village. We decided to penalize the liquor sellers (Rs. 1000/-) and the drinkers (Rs. 500/-) and incentivize informer by a gift. The penalty amount was quite huge and unaffordable for many. We also seized the ration cards and (MNREGA) employment

cards from the liquor sellers so they could not have access to the government benefit programs. Initially there were lot of objections, mostly from the men. They threatened and abused us, but we held firm to our campaign. Finally, after two to three years of rigorous campaigning, the selling of liquor was completed banned in my village.

In 2001, the NAWO-Raipur Chapter (an alliance of women organizations) formed a *Sangwari Dal* (friendship group) under the leadership of Mamta Kujur. From this group, two women leaders out of twenty-five villages were selected to participate in a workshop organized in Gholeng village, Jahspur district. I was one of them and met Mamta sister, the Secretary of the *Adivasi Mahila Maha Sangh* (Indigenous Women's Federation) in this workshop. A committee was formed during that workshop and I was appointed as a *Sanchalak* (coordinator) of the *Sangwari Dal*. We aimed to spread a liquor ban campaign to all the villages across the district after the workshop. We organized a sit-in protest for almost a month to draw the attention of the government and the public. Women from around forty to forty-five villages took turns to join the sit-in protest. Participation of at least one member from each family was mandatory, and about 3,000 women who participated in the protest. We demanded employment from the government so the people would not be dependent on alcohol sale for their livelihood. Our slogans were, "*har gaon gaon mein kam milna chahiye, kam ka sahi daam milna chahiye* (employment should be provided in every village, right wage should be given according to work); *gaon gaon mein sarab nahi, siksha chahiye* (let there be schools in every village and not liquor stores). It created a great impact on the community and public selling of local liquor was banned in most of the villages, but the licensed store was still permitted to sell. I used to be part of the team that organized such big rallies and protests.

Initially there were lot of objections, mostly from the men. They threatened and abused us, but we held firm to our campaign.

We demanded employment from the government so the people would not be dependent on alcohol sale for their livelihood.



❖ Performing an Adivasi song during the International Women's Day.

When I started working with *Mamta didi* (sister), I was assigned to strengthen the women self-help groups. I was paid Rs. 30 (less than half a dollar) for one hour of work. Nowadays we are working with about 200 women self-help groups engaged in different livelihood activities, like community agriculture, fish farming, broom making, running petty shops and selling vegetables. This way many women have become self-supportive and social entrepreneurs. They solve their common problems through mutual support and understanding. Besides this, I also worked as a field worker and used to walk a lot as I did not have a bicycle, nor did I have the money to pay for the bus fare at that time. Later, the organization provided me a bicycle, but I did not know how to ride it. So, I took it as a challenge and learned to ride a bicycle. Sometimes I had to ride up to seventy kilometers to reach the project site. I used to set up public awareness programs at the community level, by mobilizing more and more people to participate in the *Gram Sabha* (village council meeting). I raised health awareness and informed on the usage of traditional herbal medicines, trained and strengthened community leaders and organizations.

After Malti Tirkey's story with her own words, it is important to be fair to her contribution. Hence, story continues with her tales of activism but writers' word.

I raised health awareness and informed on the usage of traditional herbal medicines, trained and strengthened community leaders and organizations.



❖ Malti addressing the gathering on the occasion of World Human Rights Day.



❖ Attending a regional level human trafficking programme at Raipur Chhattisgarh.



❖ Malti interacting with community members of a village.



❖ Malti presenting how to file the Community Forest right's claim form during the GPS Training at CYSD Bhubaneswar.

Another example of Malti's activism, was her fight against the Gullu Hydro Power Plant and the displacement of the Indigenous Peoples. A power plant was proposed to be built in Gullu village, Jashpur district, Chhattisgarh state to generate 24 Megawatt of electricity. It would be built over the Ib river which flows through Chhattisgarh and Odisha in northeastern central India. 104,454 hectares of land was needed for the project which would affect ten tribal villages and vast areas of forest. The land of thirty-eight families would have been confiscated and submerged under water. The company had already obtained all necessary clearance, including forest clearance from the Ministry of Environment and Forest and was also qualified for funding by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), through benefits of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). The project was conceived in 2007 and would be executed by the Chhattisgarh Hydro Power LLP, a subsidiary from Sarda Energy and Minerals Ltd.

Adivasi Mahila Maha Sangh started to mobilize the affected community, especially the women, against the land dispossession and displacement of the Adivasis. Malti and her team went from village to village to organize meetings. Many CSOs, Trade Unions and Social Movements joined the protest. There were collective actions, public campaigns, street protest and marches, road blockades, a total boycott of official procedures, non-participation in official processes and regular strikes. The public drew the attention of the government by submitting a memorandum on how the project would cause a loss of biodiversity, forest, wildlife and agriculture. It would also lead to crop damage and food insecurity amongst Indigenous Peoples, deforestation and the loss of vegetation cover, surface water pollution and a decrease in water quality. The community people were not in favor of any project on their land. They argued that, *"we have been able to live in darkness for years, so we do not want electricity now at the cost of our land"*. They demanded that a new Gram Sabha would be held after more information was given, so the villagers could prepare their demands. The detailed project proposals should be provided to the people in Hindi or another local language, and the project experts should call a meeting to explain the technical nature of the project to the villagers. For example, the people should be informed about the place and the possible environmental impact of the project, and a written commitment should be asked for the rehabilitation plan and the packages for the displaced families. They asserted that without the people's genuine consent, no land should be acquired.

Malti and her team went from village to village to monitor the activities. They organized community meetings and assisted people to fill in the individual and community claim forms, under the provision of the *"Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Recognition of Forest Rights Act 2006"*. A major protest intensified on the 7 June 2011 during the Gram Sabha. Many villagers from Gullu, Jhargaon and Chatakpur villages, who were affected by the project, staged strong protest against the authorities and representatives of the company. They raised the slogan *"Jaan de denge, lekin Jameen nahin"* (we will lay down our life, but we will not give our land).

The project was put on hold, however, the company adopted different strategies to weaken the movement through misleading the youth or bribing community people with money, bikes, free petrol and alcohol. Company officials also collected signatures by force or by cheating people and acquired their land. Moreover, company agents spread rumors in the community that even the NGOs who were leading the campaign, had received bribes from the company. Of course, this was not true. Men were hired to keep an eye on Malti and her team's movement. They offered her money to be silent, but she refused. Malti was even attacked because she did not comply with them. In fact, they had planned to kidnap her, but she faced them bravely. One fine day, when she was returning from a village meeting on a scooter, company goons followed her in a vehicle without a license plate so no one could track them. The hired local agents tried to attack her in the middle of the jungle while she was crossing a river. However, she stood firm and said, *"I am not afraid to be killed! You can kill one Malti, but you can't kill thousands of Maltis, think about yourself, what will they (mass supporters) do to you, after I am gone!"* For a while the attackers stepped back, but they followed her again and tried to attack her from behind. Luckily, she and her colleague escaped without any injuries! Malti had recognized her attackers. They were local boys who were bribed by the company with unlimited alcohol, a bike and money. They were instructed to mobilize villagers to support the project by providing compensation. One day Malti went to meet those boys when they were at home and not drunk. She made them understand that the money and alcohol they were receiving was just a temporary pleasure, but once they would lose their land, they would lose it forever. She told them that they should preserve their land for the coming generations, and that they should think about the collective welfare of the people instead of being selfish. The project was put on hold for nearly ten years, but unfortunately, the company managed to construct the plant in 2017 by suppressing the movement through various strategies.



❖ Gullu Water Fall (source: JJVS).



❖ Meeting with a Self Help Group



❖ Meeting with the Forest Right Committee on the Forest Right Act, 2006.

Right now, Malti is working as a social activist for Jashpur Jan Vikas Sanstha (JJVS) in Gholeng as a Vice-President. She is also the President of the Jashpur District Women Cell of the Sarv Adivasi Samaj (All Tribes Society), a state level socio-political people's organization comprising community leaders from all forty-two tribes. They are actively working across the state addressing various issues of the community. Malti asserted that, *"My dream is to empower women just like me. They should be able to understand and assert their individual and community rights. They should come forward and address their own issues. I am only their 'marg darshak' or guide."*

Written by Alma Grace Barla

Part of the story was original written in Hindi by Malti Tirkey, typed by Mr. Anand Prakash Tigga and translated by Alma Grace Barla



❖ Dam under construction

3.6. Maslah Rompado: A path maker of Indigenous Peoples

Name: Maslah Rompado

Ethnicity: Dusun

Address: Kampung Malinsau, Ranau, Sabah, Malaysia.



Malaysia's Indigenous Peoples have been classified as 'bumiputera', which means "princes or sons of the soil". It is a classification that has been used as a basis for affirmative action and policies in their favor including the reservation in civil service. The Indigenous Peoples living in Malaysia are the *Orang Asli* (a general term used for Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay people) in Peninsular Malaysia, the Dayaks (a collective term used for the Iban, *Bidayuh* and *Orang Ulu* people) in Sarawak and Kadazan-Dusun state, and the Bajau and Murut, who are the largest Indigenous groups in Sabah state. The classification is good on paper, but Indigenous Peoples in Malaysia have been left behind in education, health services and other basic infrastructure in reality. Most Indigenous Peoples live in rural areas and are self-subsistent, they depend solely on their land, forests, rivers or the sea. Malaysia voted to adopt the UNDRIP in 2007 but has not ratified the ILO Convention No. 169. The UN declaration includes the eradication

of poverty and the enhancement of economic and social welfare of Indigenous Peoples. However, Malaysia continues to violate its principles, especially through land rights abuses and their response to it, the absence of FPIC, and violence against women. Land rights violations take the form of non-recognition of ownership and land grabbing. This prohibits Indigenous communities from using their land in accordance with their traditional rights – to cultivate, hunt, use for burials and ceremonies, and to inherit and transfer.

In Sabah Malaysia, there were more than 2,000 cases on land disputes and only a few were resolved. For decades crony capitalism, a system where close relationships are formed between politicians and big businesses, has permeated politics throughout Malaysia, particularly with respect to valuable natural resources such as timber and land. Land is taken in the name of development and the Indigenous Peoples living on it are chased away. One such case happened with Mawasi, a people's organization that involves three villages; Kampung Malinsau (my village), Kampung Wayan and Kampung Sinurai. My village is located sixty kilometers from the nearest town. The road is gravelled and we just recently got access to clean water and electricity. The total population of the three villages is about 2,000 Dusun people. The villagers rely on the land – our common ground – and farms to put food on the table. Our land rights were robbed four years ago. Because of cronyism, certain individuals were able to apply for ownership of our land, which was approved by the government. Afterwards, they sold the land to the Oil Palm Plantation Company.

"No words can describe the heartache and agony we bear. We feel angry, sad and betrayed. My people's life is at risk and are going to lose their sole source of income. It is still fresh in my mind how it started. It was at end of the year 2013. I work for the government and live in Kota Kinabalu City, more than 200 kilometers from my village. I was the first woman and person from my village who went to university. I am not living in the village, but I go home as much as I can. All the people in my family are farmers and still live in the village."

One day I got a call from my father, he said that he and a few villagers will come to my house and might need my help on a land issue. There is a company who want to steal our land. When I got home that evening my father and four other villagers, leaders of two other villages, Kampung Wayan and Kampung Sinurai, were waiting for me at the lobby of my apartment. My father is the chief of my village since many years. I know there was a land issue that my father and other leaders had been dealing with since I was in primary school, but I thought that the issue was resolved. After dinner I asked them what I could do to help them. My father said that they needed to see the Chief Minister of Sabah because a company came and claimed that our land belonged to them. I was so surprised to see the land title. I asked them to show me the documents that I had to take to the Chief Minister. They only showed me a piece of paper, a letter to plead the government to cancel the title. It was not enough to support our case. I asked them to show me all the documents from the beginning because this issue was the same as what they have been fighting for since my childhood.

I took all the documents and arranged them into chronological order to understand the case. The more I learned about the case, the angrier I got. I was so disappointed with the government. How could they do this to the villagers? There was something fishy about the case. I promised myself that I would defend my people's rights. I contacted the people representatives, send a letter to the Chief Minister and various departments related to land issues, and contacted Human Right organizations. At the same time, I made a report to the Malaysian anti-corruption department to ask them to investigate the Land Department for issuing a land title without following the normal procedure. I asked around how to handle this issue and our members of parliament told me to contact NGOs that deal with similar cases. That is how I got to know Partners of Community Organisations (PACOS) and Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (JOAS).

The more I learned about the case, the angrier I got. I was so disappointed with the government. How could they do this to the villagers? There was something fishy about the case. I promised myself that I would defend my people's rights.



While waiting for a response from the government, the company suddenly made a surprise visit to the village with their machinery. I still remember how scared I was at that time. While I was at the office, I received a call from my sister. She said the company came and they were escorted by the authorities (police and court staff). They showed the villagers a piece of paper which was written in English. They did not understand what was written. They asked for my help and to find someone to stop the company from cutting the rubber trees.

Imagine waking up one day and told that you are about to be evicted from your home and you no longer have the right to remain on the land that you have lived on for years. Imagine your crops being destroyed in front of your eyes. All this time, these crops have sustained your family's life and supported your children's education. And then, you are forced to watch it happening because the authorities, such as the police and court representatives are there and they keep telling you that the land now belongs to a private company.

I asked them to take a picture of the letter and send it to me. The letter was a possession order. My hand was shaking while I was dialing the PACOS number to ask if there was any lawyer who could help us. I am so grateful to PACOS and the lawyer, they filed a suit for an interim stay of order. Later the lawyer told me that the company sued the villagers,

saying that the villagers are staying on land that belongs to them. They requested a possession order to evict the villagers from that land. According to the court, the company volunteered to deliver a summons to us, but we never received the summons. This was another game played by that company and the government to prevent us from claiming our rights.



I called my sister and informed them that they could only stop the company through waiting for a court decision. I motivated them to be brave and promised them I would do anything to stop the invasion. I suggested to form a human barricade to protect the crops and the villagers of the three villages on the street. Men, women, youth and children formed a human barricade to hinder the company's machinery damaging our crops and homes. A confrontation by the men would have only made things worse and the police was there waiting for them to make a scene. So, we played it smart through playing by the rules. At the forefront of the human fort were the women. They were sitting in the middle of the road crying and begging the government to help solve the case. The women confronted the company's workers to stop them from cutting the rubber trees. When the children saw their mothers, the only thing they could do was also crying and helping them. The police could not do anything to the crying women and children.

They were sitting in the middle of the road crying and begging the government to help solve the case. The women confronted the company's workers to stop them from cutting the rubber trees. When the children saw their mothers, the only thing they could do was also crying and helping them.



I asked the youth to take as many pictures and videos as possible. I posted it on social media and called my friends working at a newspaper for a help. The social media exposure forced the government to hold up the court order and to stop the eviction. The Indigenous Women played a big role in this. Their braveness to take action to stop the machinery has saved most of our crops. The action taken by the women has gained sympathy not only from the police on the ground at the time, but also from the people who condemned the government. I organised the villagers (mostly women) to march to the State Assembly (government's highest authority) to demand our rights. Now our case is still pending in court, but the company is now scared to go into the village."

Women are very important in our community. Women serve as primary caregivers to children, elderly and the sick family members, are the holders and educators of the traditional knowledge that passed down through generations, are the main food producers and managers of the natural resources, the knowledge holders to strengthen the community's resilience to protect against the devastating effects of climate change. In our tribe, the women do most of the work to cultivate paddy or short-term crops. They do everything from selecting the seeds until the harvest and storing. They know what crops to plant to maintain soil fertility and to still be able to feed their children as well. My grandmother imposed many restrictions when we entered the forest. She said that if we did not follow these rules, the forest would get angry and the soil would become infertile. This local knowledge has become significant with the current climate change. It is their way to take care of the environment.

My grandmother imposed many restrictions when we entered the forest. She said that if we did not follow these rules, the forest would get angry and the soil would become infertile.

However, Indigenous Women in Malaysia face challenges to become Human Rights defenders because of their poor access to education and lack of knowledge on their rights. The cost of transportation and restrictions on Indigenous Women's mobility makes access to basic education economically and physically impossible. It is not a customary law, but it is in the people's mindset that Indigenous Women are not allowed to move freely. When a woman travels alone without her husband or any family member, people think that woman has a low morality. So parents did not send their daughters to school because the school is far away from home in old days. When a mother leaves her husband and child at home, the in-laws and people will talk bad about her and discourage her to be involved in the community program.

Because of our land issues, we have been introduced to organisations like PACOS TRUST and JOAS. The Indigenous Peoples Network of Malaysia or Jaringan Orang Asal SeMalaysia (JOAS) is an umbrella network for 114 organisations throughout Malaysia that represents different Indigenous Peoples' organisations and communities. As the focal point for Indigenous Rights and advocacy in Malaysia, JOAS represents the Indigenous communities regionally, nationally and internationally. JOAS also works with community-based organisations such as the Borneo Research Institute (BRIMAS), Center for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC), Partners of Community Organisations (PACOS TRUST), Sarawak Dayak Iban Association (SADIA) and Non-timber forest products (NTFPs).

Solidarity with other Indigenous Peoples makes us stronger. Through different programs we have learned a lot about our rights and to take control over decision-making. We have also learned to appreciate and maintain our culture and history, and to harness our natural resources.

Our community has been working with the Indigenous Peoples Network for three years now. Solidarity with other Indigenous Peoples makes us stronger. Through different programs, we have learned a lot about our rights and to take control over decision-making. We have also learned to appreciate and maintain our culture and history, and to harness our natural resources. Through participation in international programs, we got a chance to know more about the struggles and experiences from other parts of the world, and we can also share the knowledge gained by our community.

*Written by Maslah Rompado,
Member of Indigenous People community (Mawasi) and, Indigenous
Peoples Network of Malaysia or Jaringan Orang Asal Se-Malaysia (JOAS)*



Indigenous Women in Politics and Decision Making

- 4.1 Urmila Thami, Nepal
- 4.2 Madhabilata Chakma, Bangladesh

4.1. Urmila Thami: A real role model for Thami community

Name: Urmila Thami

Ethnicity: Thami

Address: Dolakha district, Nepal



❖ Urmila Thami
(source: Urmila Thami)

Urmila Thami, a fifty-five-year-old Indigenous woman leader, is the Vice Chairperson of Gaurishankar Rural Municipality (RM), Dolakha district, Nepal. She has been playing an important role in the municipal settling of everyday family disputes as she is also the Coordinator of the Judicial Committee for civil justice. This function authorizes her to mediate conflicts between men and women. Whoever meets her and sees her hard work, is in full of admiration of her. Her contribution

to Indigenous Women and women's empowerment in Gaurishankar RM is exemplary. This could have not been imagined about three decades ago, because women from her community were not educated and did not take up leadership roles in the past.

Urmila was born in 1964 A.D. in a poor family from Suspa, Bhimeshor Municipality. She belongs to the Thami Indigenous community of Dolakha district. She started her education at the age of seven. At first, her parents did not allow her to go to school because of their poor financial situation, having no culture of studying in the Thami Indigenous community and moreover girls going to school was not common those days. However, her parents did not stop her from going to school and she became the first Thami lady who started formal education. She enrolled at Lamanagi Primary School and always scored the highest grades. Because she was poor, her friends helped her to continue her studies by providing copies and pencils. It was a hard time for as she

had to face food scarcity and walk barefoot most of her childhood. When she finished grade three, her parents told her that it was not necessary to continue her education as she was already literate. However, she insisted that she wanted to continue, so she enrolled at Suspachhemawati Secondary School to get further education.

While she was in fourth grade, she actively took part in politics and became the Treasurer of the school unit's student forum of the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist and Leninist). She used to walk about twelve hours at night to carry out her political activities. In the early the morning she returned to the village and pretended she had stayed at home all night. This way, the followers of the autocratic Panchayat system did not suspect she was a rebel of the Panchayat system. When she reached grade seven, her teacher started to organize informal group meetings after class to teach the students about the anti-king movements. That time, the king was the main ruler of Nepal, but the people were hoping that the country would change into a democracy and wanted to start a revolution. Informal female student groups were secretly formed during that period. Her teacher could convince her to become a communist party member, and she even took up a leadership role in the school. Despite of financial problem to study, her teacher helped her to buy stationery after seeing her great aspiration to study and leadership capacity. This way she could continue to pursue her education. She decided to become a primary school teacher after her School Leaving Certificate (SLC) and joined Gaurishankar Campus Charikot, which was situated about three hours walking from her house.

Alongside her teaching profession, she continued with politics through the Nepal National Teachers' Organization and became the Vice Chairperson. She was also active in the All Nepal Women Association District Chapter of Dolakha as a Chairperson. During her tenure, she empowered women's voices and raised her voice for women's rights, including the Thami Indigenous Women. She also formed many communist party groups for women. She raised the political awareness of these women, stressed the importance of education, and inspired them to fight for causes such as women's equal rights to property.

She trained on leadership development and mentored them to boost their morale. If anybody would find out about these groups, she would be arrested by the police during those times. Therefore, they organized very informally and secretly. Urmila had already played a crucial role in the people's movement, the expansion of the communist party and the empowerment of women before becoming a democratic country. Her efforts included all people of Nepal and the country was eventually transformed into a democracy in 1989.

Urmila had already played a crucial role in the people's movement, the expansion of the communist party and the empowerment of women before becoming a democratic country.

In a meantime, she also helped to record the history of the Thami Indigenous Peoples. They did not have a clear history, so she wanted to gather as much information as possible about the past and the ancestors of the Thami people. She brought all the elderly of the community together to learn more about earlier times and the Thami culture. This way she contributed to the Thami literature, Lipi (script) and culture, and also strengthened the Thami community. Moreover, she convinced the Thami people to send both girls and boys to school and taught them, particularly the women, about health and hygiene. She wanted to improve the hygiene of the village because the Thami people were not educated and didn't take it seriously, so they used to suffer from water borne diseases. She even talked with the Chairperson of Kalinchowk RM, where the Thami are in the majority, to join the Municipality of the Gaurishankar RM in order to improve the hygiene. Urmila took initiatives for political awareness and stop alcoholism among the Thami community. She formed the *Niko Thami Sewa Samaj* (Hamro Thami Samaj) as a Thami organization, and later renamed it to *Nepal Thami Samaj*, in order to contribute to the development of the Thami people.

After resigning as teacher in 2016, she joined full-fledged politics and involved in Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), which was the dominant party in Gaurishankar RM Ward No. 2 Bigu. This is the place where she got married and where she has lived ever

since. Currently, she is a member of the steering committee of the Nepal Communist Party District Committee, which was formed after the unification of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) and Unified Nepal Communist Party (Maoist). Still only very few women from Indigenous communities in Dolakha are in politics and they do not only fight for themselves, but also manage to be a leader on social and political issues. They stand up for women's equal rights and establish women's movements to create social change. Due to Urmila's passion and immense effort, she has been elected as the Vice Chairperson of Gaurishankar RM in the local election 2018. This is an executive position, where she plays a role in the Legislative Body and coordinates the Judicial Committee. It includes the implementation of policies and guidelines in her area, and also the promulgation and amendment of laws and by-laws depending on the needs of the people.

It is not easy to work in remote areas and formal meetings do not work every time. This is why Urmila also prefers to work in an informal way by chatting with girls, women and elderly people. She attempts to encourage them to send girls to school, and teach them on improving health, hygiene and nutrition, and how to fight against women abuse and early marriages. Sometimes she instructs them individually and sometimes in group. She visits these women with a vision and she believes that the more she teaches them, the more they will become self-supportive. She narrates, "*Now those women of the Thami community have become more than capable. They even practice to educate their girl children, bring about positive change and develop leadership skills. What could be better than this?*" Further, she believes that as an Indigenous woman, she needs to build capacity on problem identification, planning and the conduction of the judicial process, and that better preparation and amendment processes. She feels the need to improve her own knowledge so she can identify real problems, and prepare, select and prioritize plans. According to her, Chairpersons should be trained on legislative, executive and judiciary related issues and its effective implementation in the Municipality. This way she can help the women of her community who still lack a deeper understanding of the existing policies, guidelines, acts and by-laws.

Her achievements are the evidence of the success story. It is a well-known fact that there is a lot of work to be done in the rural areas, however, it has barely been recognized. Examples of her achievements are the spreading among wider audiences and her commitment to work for the social welfare in rural areas such as the formation of mother groups, the provision of scholarships for female students and the care of elderly women by running an elderly shelter home with the municipal budget. Despite the challenges that she has faced such as the lack of education, a poor financial background, social taboos and a patriarchal system that prevents social transformation, she has still managed to achieve her goals. *“Transformations are possible. If you don’t believe it, take me as an example”*, Urmila Thami said. Besides as women, she has faced a lot of discrimination in her party. When she was supposed to be nominated as the Chairperson of the Municipality due to her significant contributions, the position offered to her was Vice chairperson. Moreover, the Chairperson tried to bypass her many times during the decision-making process and undermined her capacity, but she strongly opposed and now her voice is being considered and being involved in the decision-making process.

She got into inter-caste marriage and had to deal with caste-based discrimination, which was deeply rooted in the Nepalese society. Her husband belongs to Chhetri which was considered as so called ‘a higher caste’ than the Thami. Her mother-in-law and other family members did not support the inter-caste marriage and tried to humiliate her in different ways. Her husband also started abusing her after their first daughter birth. None of the family members supported her and, she burdened triple role; household chores, childcaring and teaching. It was a real frustrating and stressful situation for her. As a political conscious woman, she tried to solve the problem within her family, but at some moment out of frustration she even tried to commit suicide to threaten her husband. She never gave up and finally managed to convince all her family members to support the marriage and stop the domestic abuse. Now she has one son and two daughters, and they are well-educated. From then onwards her husband, a teacher and politically conscious person, has been supporting her to continue her political career. She strongly believes that struggle is a part of life and



❖ Urmila Thami
(source: Urmila Thami)

that everyone should overcome their challenges and continue to fight in order to build a successful family and society.

As an Indigenous woman, she has been a real role model for her community. She has been involved with political movements, community renovation and women empowerment, which can be proven by the outcomes of her active

participation in various arenas such as the social inclusion of Thami community and other poor people. She has empowered her community, including the women, by providing scholarships, giving training on leadership development, and raising awareness on the education for the Thami women. When she was the Chairperson of the Chharaswari Small Farmers Agriculture Cooperative, she even encouraged the women to enhance their skills through allocating a budget for mushroom farming. Being an educated Thami woman, other families and castes want to follow her example by sending their daughters to school, and encouraging women to take up leadership roles and actively participate in politics and social activities.

Urmila highlighted that women’s rights should be properly implemented, awareness among women and ethnic communities should be raised and women leaders should increase their confidence so they could contribute to society. Economic empowerment of women and social harmony is important that will stop Domestic violence. However, as a Vice Chairperson she has noticed that sometimes men are also abused. Husbands, working hard in the Middle East and Malaysia, are often sued for divorce after their wives and other men have been taking benefits. It creates conflicts in the family and society. She believes that gender justice is necessary. Both men and women should be well respected in their family and community in order to create a just and equitable society.

Written by Anita Shrestha

4.2. Madhabilata Chakma: An unsung hero of Indigenous Peoples

Name: Madhabilata Chakma

Ethnicity: Chakma

Address: Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh



❖ Madhabilata Chakma

When you gaze at her for the first time, the person who immediately comes to mind is your nanny, your beloved nanny. Her sweet round face, *pinon-hadi* (traditional Chakma attire), sun-soothing spectacles and somewhat chubby complexion makes you imagine she would tell a *pajjan* (Chakma folk story told by grandparents) or two after supper. The *pajjan* would make such a deep impact that *Habi-Dhabi* or *Ghuosheille* (popular *pajjan* characters) would come to visit you in your dreams.

As soon as the words are coming out of her mouth, however, her calm voice, carefully chosen words and intellectual tone of speech makes you realise that the imaginary person constructed just a few moments ago, is way distinct from how she really is. As more words are exchanged, you start to get immersed into her world of empathy, wisdom and struggle. By then the imagery of an 'ordinary' nanny-granny has faded away and the blurriness of the unknown has disappeared. The person in front of you is a bold, inspiring and selfless leader who sacrificed much of her comforts to ensure the comforts of others – the oppressed, demeaned and subjugated Indigenous Peoples of the CHT in Bangladesh. Her name is Madhabilata Chakma, an unsung hero of Indigenous Peoples.

Whoever visited the CHT might have noticed that the roofs of many Indigenous homes are decorated with an ornamental vine composed of thousands of tiny, brilliant flowers named Madhabilata. They bloom in bunches on a twig and have long slim stems. As these flowers come in different shades of red and pink, each bunch looks like a small bouquet of different flowers. Indigenous kids love these flowers a lot because they use it as a toy for many a game they play, and honey can be even sucked from the stem of the flowers. Their beauty is not the only attraction of the Madhabilata flowers though, people also love them because of their sweet fragrance. When the sun finishes its duty and the moon takes over the sky, the sweet fragrance of these flowers permeates throughout the courtyards of the Indigenous homes, sometimes even reaching the neighbours. This flower is also popular during the *Phool Biju* festival, celebrated from the 12 until the 14 April. It is a time when Indigenous people say adieu to the old year and prepare to welcome the new year. They pray to *Ma Gongee*, the river goddess, with Madhabilata and other flowers collected from the gardens and forests, for the prosperity and happiness of all.

The Madhabilata flower, which shares its name with the powerful Indigenous Women leader, is therefore probably the most perfect metaphor to provide a very short portrayal, a microscopic snippet of the contributions that Madhabilata has made for others throughout her life. Quite like the stunning beauty and sweet fragrance of the flower, most of her accomplishments were barely made for her own. Her devotion has always been to bring betterment into other people's lives, especially Indigenous Women in the CHT.

Madhabilata was born on the 20 December 1938, in Hetmora, a picturesque village of Chudi Mawrum (Choto Mohaprum) area, Rangamati district, Bangladesh. Until Kaptai lake devoured the area permanently, it had been the home to some of the brightest minds of the CHT. Krishna Kishore Chakma, Chitta Kishore Chakma, Manabendra Narayan (MN) Larma, Jyotirindra Bodhipriya (Santu) Larma and Sharadendu Shekhar (SS) Chakma, to name some, were all born in that area. Like Madhabilata, they have made significant contributions in advancing the whole region in different ways.

Her father Girishchandra was a middle-class farmer. As a homemaker, her mother Torkopudi shouldered the major responsibility of taking care of the family including six children. Madhabilata is the youngest of two brothers and four sisters. When she was about three years old her family moved to Komolchari area of Khagrachari district, where her father became a *Karbari* (village head). Madhabilata spent the rest of her childhood over there and followed education at a local school until grade six. Despite being keen to pursue further education, she could not continue as there was no school in the area. Her education was also hindered because her family broke up, which seriously affected the financial capacity of the family.

They moved to India, Burma and other parts of the CHT, leaving all their memories forever buried under the Kaptai lake.

In 1959, Madhabilata returned to Mawrum to live with her aunt. She took a job at Ghuichhuri Primary School and started to teach at a minimum wage. Soon the living conditions in the area would begin to change dramatically when Pakistan government finished the construction of the Kaptai dam in 1960. Gradually the dammed mighty Borgang (Karnaphuli) river could not flow like before and the water levels rose everywhere. A lake was formed which devoured everything that came in its way – scenic Indigenous villages, green rice fields, orchards, markets, schools and temples. Thousands of Indigenous and local Bengali villagers were displaced. They moved to India, Burma and other parts of the CHT, leaving all their memories forever buried under the Kaptai lake. Most people did not get any compensation, and those who did, found it to be much lower than their losses. This very dark incident in the history of the CHT leaving all those who experienced it utterly shocked. Also, Madhabilata was profoundly moved by this incident.

Having lost their homes, lands and living resources, a massive struggle was ahead for those who stayed in the CHT as they were desperately looking for alternative sources of livelihood. Because of this disastrous ‘development’ project, frustrations were growing amongst the people. To deal with this, the government had set up some ‘rehabilitation’

programs on horticulture, sericulture and handloom. However, it was not an easy adaptation for the people who had hitherto lived a life of abundance with plentiful gifts from mother nature. Madhabilata also took a training on sericulture and traditional loom in Rajshahi after losing her job as a primary school teacher. Later she became an instructor to promote sericulture in Rangamati, however, the sericulture project did not turn out to be successful and was withdrawn. In 1964, Madhabilata joined the Social Welfare Department as an instructor of traditional loom where she provided vocational training to women.

Meanwhile, a group of Indigenous youth led by MN Larma started to organize themselves to protest against the Kaptai dam and the domination of the Pakistani military junta who had imposed martial law. While the memory of the Kaptai dam was still vivid in her mind, she was thrilled by the fighting spirit of these tender yet visionary souls. Interactions with them dramatically transformed her thinking process. Although she was usually a quite calm person, she started to protest against any discrimination or wrongdoings that came on her way. In 1967, this metamorphosis even led her to quit her job as an instructor after she was exposed to anomalies and misuse of power in her office. She organized Indigenous Women who were involved with weaving activities. It was almost pioneer work because those days it was not common for women to get involved in such political activities.

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The movement of Indigenous Peoples in the CHT started to receive momentum around 1970 when general elections took place and a ban on political activities was withdrawn. Indigenous peoples were further inspired by the victory of the Liberation Forces in the Bangladesh Liberation War 1971. However, the Bengali ruling elites of the newborn People’s Republic of Bangladesh did not come forward to fulfill the demands of Indigenous Peoples for autonomy and protection of their rights and culture. This refusal further strengthened the political mobilization among the Indigenous Peoples. In 1972, the *Parbatya*

Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) party was formed in Rangamati. This was the first full-fledged political party to represent the Indigenous Peoples of the CHT. Although already politically active, Madhabilata became a full-time activist for the PCJSS. Alongside many other activities, she devoted much of her time and energy to create awareness amongst Indigenous Women and mobilize them to work for the cause of Indigenous people. This brought about an increasing participation of Indigenous Women in the movement.

Madhabilata and her comrades had always felt the need of a platform for Indigenous Women which would work side by side with the main platform and focus on taking care of the specific issues that women face.

Women were particularly underrepresented in political participation and decision-making roles. Even now, the representation of women in the public sphere is still far from acceptable.

Although not as prevalent as a lot of other societies, male domination was commonplace in the CHT's Indigenous societies. Women were particularly underrepresented in political participation and decision-making roles. Even now, the representation of women in the public sphere is still far from acceptable. Taking into account the male domination and patriarchal prevalence in society, they decided to form an ad-hoc committee for women in 1973. The aim was to form an organization of women to work on women issues whilst also trying to establish Indigenous self-determination. The committee started to organize Indigenous Women and build their capacities. Gradually they were successful in forming several regional committees in other parts of the CHT.

Two years after the formation of this ad-hoc committee they finally managed to become a full-fledged organization. On 10 August 1975, through a convention organized by the committee, the *Parbatya Chattagram Mohila Samiti* (CHT Women's Forum) was formed in Itchori, Khagrachari district. It was the first women's organization in the history of the CHT. The convention was presided over by Minu Pru Marma. Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma, current president of the PCJSS,

was present as the chief guest. The two-day convention ended with a central committee electing Madhabilata as the president of the newly formed organization. While shouldering this great responsibility Madhabilata did not know she would remain the president of the organization for over three and a half decades. Her first assignment as the president was in Ichhamoti (Kaukhali and Laxmichari) area where she worked hard to mobilize local Indigenous Women, but also to establish more branch committees of the organization. Later on, she worked in many other areas of the CHT, which resulted in more regional chapters. This way the coverage of the Mohila Samiti gradually expanded throughout the region, especially in Rangamati and Khagrachari area.

After the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the main architect of Bangladesh on 15 August 1975, the overall political situation of Bangladesh went through a series of dramatic swings and a military junta was installed to govern the country. These developments led the PCJSS to switch from a hitherto democratic movement to an armed resistance. In 1976, a total of thirty-five members from the Mohila Samiti, belonging to different Indigenous communities, received a political and military training course offered by the PCJSS. The training was mainly a self-defense course for the Mohila Samiti members. This was the first and perhaps only time when a military training was given by a group of Indigenous Women in the history of the CHT.

In the meantime, armed clashes between the PCJSS and state forces became more frequent and their military operations raised to an extreme level. It became nearly impossible for the Mohila Samiti members to continue their usual work like going to the villages and organizing women in public. In some cases, they even got detained or harassed. Many members and supporters of the Mohila Samiti were also discouraged by their families. Given the prevalent patriarchal mindset among many males and females in society, they often had to withstand reproaches like “*while men are failing, what bullshit will women be able to achieve?*” Due to such an ongoing pressure coming from many sides, a lot of Mohila Samiti members found it hard to stay involved with the movement. Many dropped out, but Madhabilata did not quit.

Madhabilata and other Mohila Samiti members continued to look for new ways within this tensed environment, where incidents of armed operations were mounting every day. The situation was further aggravated from the late 1970s when the Ziaur Rahman-regime used four hundred thousand “Bengali settlers” from the plains as a human shield against the armed resistance of the PCJSS. Gradually freedom of speech, freedom of movement and freedom of association became extremely limited in the CHT. Violence and harassment became everyday phenomena, incidents of communal attacks and raids on Indigenous villages kept rising, and Indigenous Women became one of the major targets. As Mohila Samiti members could not work openly in the villages anymore, they concentrated on the families of the PCJSS members, especially the female members. They tried to mobilize them through the formation of committees and by creating more awareness. It was a limited but active way of sustaining the spirit of the movement among the Indigenous Women. After the CHT Accord was signed between the government and the PCJSS in 1997, the Mohila Samiti movement resumed to work with Indigenous Women like they did before.

Due to Madhabilata’s constant efforts to organize Indigenous Women, the PCJSS leadership honored her by electing her as a member of the PCJSS central committee in 1988, a position she holds until today. She was also selected as a counsellor of the interim CHT Regional Council formed in 1998. However, fame has barely attracted her attention. Like all great minds, an impressive virtue of Madhabilata is her selflessness. She even suggested to only publish this interview, taken in 2015, after she has passed away. Later she consented for the publication in *herstory* as it may inspire many other women.

After so many years, when she looks back at those old days of struggle, her voice becomes heavy but her eyes are still brilliant. Memories of numerous events of her life are coming and going, some she still remembers very well, others are partially blurred or even different than she remembers. Many of those memories are not merely of the struggles she faced, but also of the love, trust and respect that she has received from the Indigenous villagers – women and men. In fact, many memories of how villagers supported her and her comrades are still vivid in her memory.



❖ Madhabilata Chakma (source: Madhabilata Chakma)

Madhabilata became an octogenarian in December 2018. Of course, she cannot go door-to-door or village-to-village anymore to create awareness among Indigenous Women. But she has not retired from her work; she still attends public meetings, perhaps only silently listening and observing others or having a chitchat with the comrades of later generations.

Her work of ending patriarchal and State domination against Indigenous Women remains unfinished. Her goal of establishing democracy, human rights, justice and secularism remains unrealized. Her aspiration of self-determination of Indigenous Peoples in the CHT is still a distant dream. Madhabilata, however, is a dreamer and optimist. To her, change is a matter of work, time and patience. In her own words, “... we have to be patient about change. Perhaps it will not happen while I am alive. Perhaps in the following generation. But change will surely happen.”

Written by Bablu Chakma

AIPP Publication Feedback Form

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AIPP Secretariat

About AIPP

The Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) is a regional organization established in 1992 by Indigenous Peoples' movements as a platform for solidarity and cooperation. AIPP is actively promoting and defending indigenous peoples' rights and human rights; sustainable development and management of resources and environment protection. Through the years, AIPP has developed its expertise on grassroots capacitybuilding, advocacy and networking from local to global levels and strengthening partnerships with indigenous organizations, support NGOs, UN agencies and other institutions. At present, AIPP has 47 members from 14 countries in Asia with 7 indigenous peoples' national alliances/networks and 35 local and sub-national organizations including 16 are ethnic-based organizations, five (5) indigenous women and four (4) are indigenous youth organizations.

Our Vision

Indigenous Peoples in Asia are living with dignity and fully exercising their rights, distinct cultures and identity, and enhancing their sustainable management systems on lands, territories and resources for their own future and development in an environment of peace, justice and equality.

Our Mission

AIPP strengthen the solidarity, cooperation and capacities of indigenous peoples in Asia to promote and protect their rights, cultures and identities, and their sustainable resource management system for their development and self-determination.

Our Programmes

Our main areas of work among the different programmes are information dissemination, awareness raising, capacity building, advocacy and networking from local to global. Our programmes are:

- Communication Programme
- Environment
- Human Rights Campaign and Policy Advocacy
- Indigenous Women
- Organizational Strengthening and Movement Building
- Regional Capacity Building

AIPP is accredited as an NGO in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and as observer organization with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Green Climate Fund (GCF), Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). AIPP is a member of the International Land Coalition (ILC).

AIPP produces this fourth volume to amplify the voices and struggles of Indigenous Women in the Asia region. This year we wanted to mark and celebrate International Women's Day by contributing to the theme 'Balance for better'. Through documenting and disseminating changes, struggles and achievements of Indigenous Women change makers under the topic of 'Role of Indigenous Women in Balance for Better', we wish to increase recognition of the rights of Indigenous Women, both within their communities and outside, to promote the solidarity of all Indigenous Women, and to create a tool for advocacy at all levels. - Gam Shimray, Secretary General, AIPP

HerStory4 reflects the strength of the indigenous women's movement for empowerment, leadership and justice and is a result of the dedication of our partners and friends from indigenous communities in the Philippines, Northeast India, Mainland India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, Nepal, and Cambodia. Here, 15 women have bravely shared their stories to empower and promote the solidarity of indigenous women, not only in Asia, but worldwide.

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