

Blog: The climate crisis affects lives of indigenous people in Bangladesh and internationally (Yi Yi Prue)



My name is Yi Yi Prue. I belong to the Marma indigenous community in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in south-eastern Bangladesh. My hometown is Bandarban, but as a lawyer I am practicing in Dhaka Judge Court. I am delighted to be with WWW and with you all. It means a lot to me to be able to share my experiences and the perspectives of indigenous people here in Germany.

The total number of Indigenous People in Bangladesh, including in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, is estimated to be three to four million. In my home region, there are eleven different indigenous communities who speak their own languages, follow their own traditions and have a specific economic system. The basis of our community life is agriculture by shifting cultivation in the forests of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. We call this form of cultivation “Jum” and because it is important for all of us, the indigenous people of all communities in our hill region are called “Jumma” or “Jum people”.

Traditionally we do not know private land property, because the members of the village communities work together to produce what they need to survive. However, outsiders often misunderstood this system and thought that the land and forests belong to nobody and they could take it without asking anybody. Therefore, we only could survive in a remote region in the Hills.

But we are still struggling for our survival and during the past few years, this struggle has intensified. The tipping points for our survival are very close, in some cases they have been passed already. We have passed the tipping points of losing our culture, our language and our traditions. This is the result of indigenous and marginalized communities living at the intersection of multiple crises. Racism and discrimination exacerbate the climate injustices we are facing. Indigenous communities are amongst the most affected by the climate crisis and they will be disproportionately affected in the

future too. This is especially true in a country like Bangladesh because – as many people in Germany are aware – Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries. Struggling with rising sea levels, floods and land slides, hurricanes, but also droughts, Bangladesh is at the forefront of the climate crisis.

For example, in 2017, landslides killed more than 100 people in two districts of my home region. In 2022, a flood caused death and destruction in the north and east of Bangladesh. According to an UN joint press statement, “an estimated 7.2 million people have been severely affected following devastating flash floods”. This year again – in 2024 – heavy rains impacted more than 2.5 million people in northern Bangladesh according to Bangladesh Red Crescent Situation Report 01 stated that impacted over 2.5 million people. These are only some examples of the natural disasters which are intensifying year by year. To better understand the consequences of these catastrophes, I have been visiting and interviewing victims of the climate crisis, especially from indigenous communities, in Bangladesh.

People told me about the loss of family members and belongings and how they are coping with the crisis.

Mong Khyai Prue Marma, a young boy in my hometown, told me how he lost his books and his house where he was living with his mother. When I asked him to make a video to describe the situation and ask for support, he was shy to do so as he didn't want to be seen as if he was begging – even though he had contributed nothing to the catastrophe.

A young leader and indigenous activist, Dilip Pathan, told me about the effects of climate change on his home region: It's an area of drought, so even during the rainy season, there is no rain anymore. To make the situation even more difficult, the water is distributed unequally as his people are discriminated against by the majority. This led to two farmers in his community committing suicide as they did not get water for their crops. That someone feels the need to kill himself is not about self-control, it's a matter of discrimination and mental health struggles due to the effects of the climate crisis – another issue that is not talked about a lot in the public debate.

I also talked to Parag Richil, a writer from the Garo indigenous community. He tries to address the water crisis in his writing. He told me how the water situation in his home region is exacerbating: There used to be no problems with water collection, but now the water level has dropped significantly due to the climate crisis. He said that he is hoping that future generations will be able to live in this region where he grew up.

Another voice of that Garo community, Anitta Mankhin, told me about the discrimination that her community faces. One day, the government of Bangladesh turned forests which belong to her community into reserve forest. The community was not allowed to enter the forest anymore even though it had relied on it as a basis of existence for many years. This shows the injustices which indigenous communities are facing. Anitta Mankhin told me that they were ready to make their voices heard, but they doubted that anyone would

really listen to their concerns. This is how many indigenous people think. For so many generations now, we have experienced consistent exclusion from conversations that directly affect us, as if our lives count for nothing. This is the same story as that of many other indigenous people, whose remaining lands have been opened to mining and monocropping, prioritising the profits of large international corporations over their own right to survive and live as they would like. Many indigenous communities in different countries are displaced or economically deprived of their sources of livelihood as their forests are cleared, and they are prohibited from practicing their traditional, customary cultivation practices.

The activist Horendra Nath told me similar stories of how badly his people were treated by the majority community. Since childhood, he has had to listen to people saying that members of his community were dirty. When going out to tea shops, he was treated like a second-class-citizen. He told me that in some places, indigenous people are also paid less for their work.

It's the intersection of discrimination, economic challenges and the climate crisis, which is making the lives of indigenous people so difficult. To understand how these injustices are linked, our voices need to be listened to and incorporated into decision-making processes. Only through the active involvement of indigenous communities and other marginalised groups can the world stand a chance of success, both in alleviating the disproportionate impact of the climate crisis on the most vulnerable populations as well as in actually achieving the increasingly distant goal of keeping global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees.

It's the same story that you hear from indigenous communities across the world. For example, on the other side of the globe, the Machareti in Bolivia have called a state of emergency. They are threatened by the climate crisis and they are losing their land to industrial farmers. So they are forced to go in other jobs or to have big farms and use pesticides – something contradictory to their traditional way of doing agriculture.

We are suffering from the impacts of climate change, social racism and environmental racism. We are facing multiple difficulties to ensure our communities are protected from exploitation in this world. Indigenous people are facing mental health struggles, as illustrated by the farmers committing suicide when they did not get water for their crops. But this is not everything. People struggle with toxic water, polluted air, lack of water, flood, cyclones and droughts on top of social and economic problems good health care and acceptance by other people.

So, in order to stand up for our rights, we as indigenous people need to unite. But most importantly, we as guardians of a sustainable life style need to be listened to. And this is not happening.

In past conferences, while there were representatives of indigenous peoples, their participation was limited to the cultural programme or other performances; they were

not represented in the discussions on the main issues such as climate adaptation and mitigation. At the end of the programme our experiences of many years of discrimination and struggles for survival had not been expressed, heard or incorporated into key decisions and recommendations.

Without our substantial participation, the targeted Sustainable Development Goals will not be achieved. The case of the FosenwindPark, found by the Supreme Court of Norway in October 2021 to have “infringed reindeer grazing lands and therefore violated the right to culture of the Sámi indigenous people in the Fosen area” is a case in point.

Respecting indigenous peoples’ rights goes hand in hand with respecting the natural environment; cases such as the Fosenwind Park show how this is often not being done. Only if indigenous voices are more actively included in decision-making processes can we share both our perspectives on environmental protection and recommendations as to how climate injustice, particularly as it impacts the most marginalised communities, can be addressed. If indigenous peoples’ rights are respected and civic spaces of engagement assured, we can explain and provide more concrete recommendations to address climate injustice.

The climate ruling of the German Constitutional Court from April 2021 is encouraging. The climate policies of the German government have to respect the basic right to freedom, no matter whether this concerns German citizens or marginalised communities in South Asia. The German government has to respect our rights.

I was on a speaking several tour in Germany, talking about climate justice and injustice. Various members of my community, especially young people, were excited about the prospect that our community’s voices would be heard. However, we are eagerly waiting for the most important bit of information: How exactly do you want to avoid crossing the 1.5-degree limit? Existing and even planned measures will not be sufficient. So, what exactly is going to change? How will the government of Germany and of other countries responsible for global warming, take our rights to survival into consideration? What can be done?

We need everybody to contribute to the answers of these questions. Of course, individual actions matter, but most importantly, we need to unite forces to pressure decision makers.

At the moment, many things are happening in the world, which are taking attention away from climate. Attention for all the topics and discussions connected to the climate crisis is not growing at the moment, but getting less. People who are working for peace and a better world are somehow not getting attention anymore and some people are losing hope for a successful fight against the climate crisis. But it is crucial that we do not forget this immense struggle, as it will affect the entire world sooner or later.

We need to take urgent climate action, but we need to do it in a way that respects everyone’s rights. Especially already marginalised groups, like women and girls and

indigenous communities, need to be listened to. Only then can we ensure climate justice.