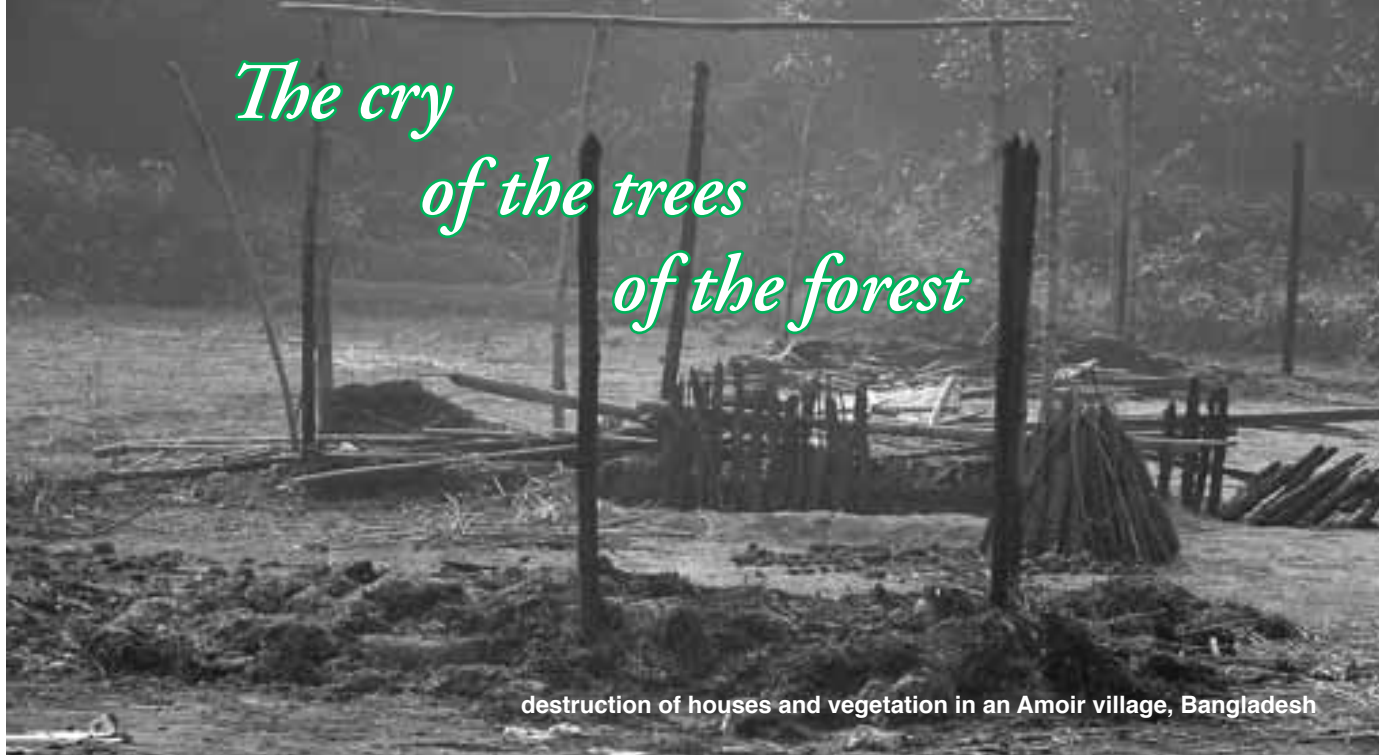


The cry of the trees of the forest



destruction of houses and vegetation in an Adivasi village, Bangladesh

Michael Mrong, from Bangladesh laments the plight of his people

Michael Mrong of *Caritas Bangladesh* tells the story of the forestry ‘experts’ who visited an area of forest inhabited by Adivasi – the indigenous people of Bangladesh. “They roped off an area of seven square feet and asked the experts what they saw there. They said they saw two trees and some small plants. Then they brought an Adivasi elder, who had no formal education. He said he saw 63 medicinal plants – and two big trees.”

Michael, who recently visited New Zealand as *Caritas* Lenten speaker in schools and parishes, says eviction of indigenous peoples is always a precursor to environmental destruction of the forests. As recently as 10 February, the village of Amoir containing the households of 29 families was burned to the ground (*see above*). Villagers were beaten and some left with serious injuries. They had no food for four days.

Michael who is himself Adivasi, of the Garo people, said his people believe that when trees fall, the other trees of the forest cry. “When Adivasi are evicted, they hear the cry of the land, the cry of nature, and they also cry.” Eviction of indigenous people, alienation of their lands, and the environmental destruction that follows is not the history lesson that many New Zealanders consider. In Bangladesh, it is a relatively recent experience.

Michael grew up on traditional lands where his family had lived “from time immemorial”. As a child he remembers his family having a field for grazing, and plentiful food from the fruits and vegetables available in the forests. Traditional harvesting methods ensured that sufficient roots and crops were left to regenerate for the following year.

At that time, around 100,000 people lived in the area. There are now more than 20 million people living off the

same land. Newcomers to the area found they enjoyed the taste of the forest food but knew nothing of sustainable harvesting. “They collected everything, and there is no chance to regenerate.”

The introduction of individual land titles in the 1950s began the alienation of Adivasi land. “Many influential people falsified land titles, and after some years they forcibly took the land. The Adivasi could not show any documents.” Some cases went to court “but without documents they could not get a decision in their favour.”

The situation had worsened after the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, with many Hindus migrating to India and Muslims arriving in the then ‘East Pakistan’, which is now Bangladesh. The Adivasi people, who make up 65 percent of the Catholic population of Bangladesh, were considered Hindus by those making decisions to redistribute land to Muslim arrivals.

In the name of development, the recent past government of the present day – at times with overseas aid assistance – has continued the eviction of indigenous peoples. One 2005 case involved the destruction of an Adivasi village of 65 families to make way for a government ‘model village’ funded by the European Commission. After EC representatives visited the area, Michael says they announced that “not one more euro” would be spent on the model village project. But the evictions continue.

The *Caritas* response has been to establish six Integrated Community Development projects, including one in the area of Dinajpur which is supported by *Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand*. In Dinajpur 57 percent of Adivasi are landless, and many work as low-paid labourers on their traditional lands.

A Hitchhiker's Guide to God

Jeph Mathias and friend are thumbing their way round the S Island. Suddenly there is a precious moment to say what personal faith is all about

OK. Give me the guts of your faith, all the key stuff, no waffle. Ya've got thirty seconds.

This was classic Nick. He's one of my best friends for his heart of pure steel but he's also got a mind like an arrow: unwavering in its rationality, its skepticism – and its honesty.

We were medical students then, hitchhiking around New Zealand's South Island for our summer holidays. As the thousandth driver drove past, Nick decided to finally sort out all this religion stuff.

"Give me five minutes to think, Nick"

"It'd better be worth the wait" he pseudo-growled.

What should I say? I rifled through the

book of faith inside my head trying, trying, to find words for my answer. Did he want to be told he should sign up now and wave his membership card as he cruised on in through the pearly gates to eternal life? Nah! Not from me anyway. I reckon we are all saved, not just Christians.

Even then I saw God as a parent, and no parent has 'in' children and 'out' children. Nick would have thrust his rationality like a rapier at me with Why? Is God's unlimited love limited to those who love or better still serve him? Nick wanted the guts of *my* faith and trying to win a 'get-out-of-hell-free' card is not me.

What about the Lord as my shepherd?

The strong loving God who wards off enemies and dangers, looks after me,

makes me lie down in green pastures, gives me everything I need and more. Beautiful! Yeah! I could tell him I have joined the herd with the big powerful God on its side. No again! He'd ask why the psalm goes on to beg warm, fluffy God to let me feast, and gloat, in the sight of my enemies (where is their loving father?), he'd ask where the shepherd is today and who feasts in whose sight.

"Easy", he'd have said, "for us in our rich world with all our aircraft carriers and cluster bombs to lie down in green pastures and control people to work for \$1 a day to make us shoes as their children die of malnutrition." He'd tell me to take my chances alone rather than bow to a power hungry God like that. Maybe God does send miraculous healing to phone-in call-

The scope of the projects includes agricultural work, such as seed banking and breeding new crop varieties, through to supporting social organisation in the villages and communities. When villages and communities have committees and other forums for discussing the issues they are facing, often for the first time they are finding a voice in legal and political protest against evictions. Michael says the experience of indigenous people in facing so many layers of cultural and political

disadvantage is summed up in the Bangla proverb: *I have the pain in my whole body, where to put the medicine?*

For Michael, the actions of those who destroy both the lives of indigenous people and the forests in which they live are actions against God. "Adivasi living in the forests live peaceful lives, close to God. Eviction of the Adivasi who live close to God is eviction of God's love. Oppression of the Adivasi is oppression of nature, and oppression of God." ■

Interview for Tui Motu by Lisa Beech, of Caritas Aotearoa

Adivasi people in Bangladesh protesting against evictions

