



# World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

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**GUESTS:** Phrang Roy  
Asst. President  
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

Dinaz Stafford  
Film Maker

**JOURNALISTS:** Haider Rizvi  
Inter Press Service/IPS

Cristina Veran  
Village Voice

**MODERATOR:** Tony Jenkins

## **“Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Knowledge”**

A majority of the more than 300 million indigenous people in the world today are very poor and living in remote rural areas. Many of them, however, have a unique understanding of their environment, and a special knowledge of what experts call “sustainable agriculture” and “biodiversity”.

In this episode of World Chronicle the focus is on the culture of rice among the Garo people of Northeast India, who are the subject of a lyrical new documentary called “Still, the Children are Here”. The guests in the studio are Dinaz Stafford, who directed the film; and Phrang Roy, Assistant President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), an agency that, among other things, provides loans for sustainable agriculture projects.

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Executive Producer: Michele Zaccheo  
Director: Livingston Hinckley  
Production Assistant: Lebe Besa

**ANNOUNCER:** From the United Nations in New York, an unedited interview programme on global issues. This is **World Chronicle**. And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

**JENKINS:** Hello, I'm Tony Jenkins and this is **World Chronicle**.

There are more than 300 million indigenous people in the world today. Many are living in very remote rural areas. Most are very poor. All have a special relationship with their surroundings – and often a unique understanding of their environment.

Indigenous People, Indigenous Knowledge – that's the topic of today's programme and I'm pleased to have with us in the studio:

Mr. Phrang Roy, Assistant President of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (also known as IFAD) and Ms. Dinaz Stafford, a psychologist and film director who has recently completed her documentary on the Garo people, in Northeast India.

Welcome to **World Chronicle**.

Dinaz, I'd like to start with you. We'll get to see some clips of your film a little later on, but I'd like to know what interested you on the Garo people in Northeast India in the first place? And what was the story that you wanted to tell through this film?

**STAFFORD:** One of the most interesting things about this area is that the indigenous people here have been cultivating rice for well over 6,000 years. And in doing so they have brought to humanity an incredible gift, which has changed the way people live in effect.

**JENKINS:** What is it?

**STAFFORD:** Rice - growing rice. And this...the juxtaposition of the modern world, where we are now in this century, and this way of life that involved growing rice in the same way as so many years ago was something that interested me about the film. And that sort of lead me over there really.

**JENKINS:** Well, we'll get to that a bit more in a moment. First I want to ask Phrang, how does your agency, the International Fund for Agricultural Development work with indigenous people across the globe? I mean, for example, do you provide loans for agricultural projects? How do you monitor these and see what impact they've made? And do the funds had to be followed through government agencies? Or can they go directly to the people that you hope to be financing?

**ROY:** We provide generally loans to governments - that's the normal channel that we follow. However, in the course of the last 25 years of our history, we realized, also in consultation with the governments, that people and where they have their own communities or have worked together, they can take decisions on matters that affect their lives. That's very crucial and one way of empowering people is to pass financial resources directly to them on

matters that we have agreed with - the government and the people and with the agencies on certain values that we deemed important.

**JENKINS:** I see. We're joined in the studio today by Haider Rizvi of the Inter Press Service/IPS, and by Cristina Veran of the Village Voice. Cristina do you want to jump in?

**VERAN:** Sure, actually I'll put the question to you Dinaz. It's my understanding that the positioning for indigenous peoples in India is perhaps a bit more complex than in other countries in terms of their recognition as distinct or sovereign, cultural or political entities. If you can give us a sense please on how that complexity relates to the issues that the Garo people have in terms of selling their rice, entering the global market, and those kinds of things?

**STAFFORD:** I think I'll never forget one time speaking to a young indigenous person who had converted to Christianity, and I said to them, "What made you convert to Christianity?" And they said, "Oh you know, we rather be known as Christian than Indian". They didn't even see the...they don't see themselves as...I think that there's a role distinction between their sense of being a citizen of India and their sense of being Garo. And I think that they inhabit them ...I think that the Garos as a people inhabit their culture as Garos, but do not inhabit their culture as Indians. And I think that this probably has to do with... correct me if I'm wrong Phrang, this is something that you could join me in... but this I feel probably has something to do with both the government and the culture, and the way the two have not really been able to bridge their communication and their gap. And I think that a lot of the kinds of issues that are raised come up from this inability to have a free flow of communication really.

**RIZVI:** Tell us what's the role of the Indian government in this whole affair and whether the elders of Garo people, they are happy or unhappy with what is going on in terms of conversion to Christianity or any other issues?

**STAFFORD:** That's two questions there because I think that the government on the one hand right now is very, very eager to try to deal with the tribal issue, indigenous people, which for some reason, India seems to still insist on calling [them] tribal. I think that there is a real tendency to want to do something but an inability to actually get a program that works directly with the people and actually addresses the issues of the people; and this is probably a historical, it feels like a huge historical background to this. I remember reading about it, stumbling upon it 20 years ago when I was a student. So one is there is this gap, and then the second is that the Christian movement actually was able to reach out and touch the Northeast of India and touch the people and actually address their issues – on their terms. So there was a big movement, Christianity moved into this area, and was able to do a lot. And so there's been a huge amount of conversion and...there's also I think, I found amongst the people a sense of

feeling that they were joining a modern world by joining Christianity because they could then be feel more in affinity to major countries that are Christian, like the United States.

**JENKINS:** Let's put Phrang Roy on this because Phrang, you are a member of an indigenous minority yourself. What kind of status do you enjoy in India? How does the government handle indigenous peoples in India?

**ROY:** In India the constitution recognizes special status to be given to marginalized groups of which the indigenous people, or in India they call [them] the tribal people. There's a special constitutional protection and for the...

**JENKINS:** Do they follow through on those protections?

**ROY:** They do in the sense that, for example, land, which belongs to the tribal communities cannot be sold to a non-tribal. And there's been a recent ...

**JENKINS:** That land should... sorry to butt in...but that land would encompass, for example, forests, and as we know these days people look at forests as commodity resources for timber and what have you, and they will often violate government strictures. I think probably Indonesia is the clearest example of that. Do the laws work? Do the protections work in India? Or do people ignore them? Do people come and chop your trees down?

**ROY:** In the Northeast there's a lot of...the forest belongs to the communities, and not to the states, I mean a major portion of it, and that has been the protection. In fact the irony recently is that people had been selling their trees so easily that the supreme court had to intervene for the...

**JENKINS:** The indigenous people are selling trees?

**ROY:** Yes. And many of them are selling it in ways that, of course, they do not get the best benefit because there were a few crafty traders who knew how to make deals...

**RIZVI:** To follow up to Tony's question. I want to know what logging companies are doing in that region and if there are environmental groups who could be making alliances with the indigenous people over there to stop that kind of logging? .....more than the supreme court intervening into the situation?

**ROY:** Because the land and the forest belongs to tribal people and tribal communities, and because the constitution prohibits non-tribals to hold or lease land in those areas, so there is a certain amount of protection, it has to be always done in the name of the tribal world, in India they call it the "BENAMI" trade.

[Benami purchases are purchases in false name of another person, who does not pay the consideration but merely lends his name, while the real title vests in another person who actually purchased the property and he is the beneficial owner.]

So the sort of entrance of logging companies as you've seen in Indonesia is not there because of the right that they have to land, etc.

**JENKINS:** So, in other words by protecting the indigenous people, the government is also in the sense protecting the environment because the indigenous people are custodians of their own local environment?

**ROY:** Yes, that's true but I think within the upper class around the tribals, there is a certain amount of monetization that is taking place. And they're quite keen to get as much or to maximize their profits; so that is an area too that one needs to look into.

**JENKINS:** Sorry Cristina... I just want to go to the first clip of the movie because I think it might actually shed some light on what we're discussing. Let's take a look at this clip. It's from the film by Dinaz Stafford about the Garo people in India and the culture of rice.:

## VIDEO ROLL-IN [1'56"]

### "STILL, THE CHILDREN ARE HERE"

**(MUSIC – while the following sub-titles are being shown)**

1. Rice is the basic food of half the world.
2. Mankind has been farming rice for over 6000 years.
3. The indigenous Garos of North East India still adhere to the original ways.
4. Traditional rice genes are the building blocks of modern rice.
5. Diverse traditional varieties have been displaced by the more fragile hybrids.
6. Traditional rice seeds disappear as more farmers turn to high-yielding rice.
7. The Garos have nurtured a living genetic resource on which the future of rice depends.
8. The Garo village of Sadolpara, Meghalaya, India – 2003.

**1<sup>st</sup> GARO WOMAN (subtitle):** The first man who settled in Sadolpara was called Sadolgatnim...My mother was born here... We drank from the same well... She is my younger sister...When we were young, she always lagged behind me in the fields...I was first but now...

**2<sup>nd</sup> GARO WOMAN (subtitle):** Oh well, first is always first.

**1<sup>st</sup> GARO WOMAN (subtitle):** Now, I cannot work in the fields.

**2<sup>nd</sup> GARO WOMAN (subtitle):** Jetsing and his wife Chamji were born here in Sadolpara. ..He was the village judge...There's Sotjing, my youngest son...And Sotjing has a wife, Nekri...Then there's Chekjing...His uncle Jumin captured him for his inheriting daughter...Chekjing's wife's name is Mejak...They are well off...

## VIDEO OUT

**JENKINS:** It looks truly beautiful up there. But I think often when we speak of indigenous issues it's easy to get depressed, let's put it that way, because the choice often seems to be one between assimilation on the one hand, which often implies losing your language, losing your culture, losing your knowledge of the natural environment, which we've been talking about, or on the other hand, increase marginalization. I'm wondering what your experience was, about tug-of-war while you're making a movie? And, do you have examples of good policies that are working that keep traditions alive? Or is there something that could be done to help indigenous people reconcile to the inevitable, the inevitability of assimilation?

**STAFFORD:** I think it's an interesting situation that you have here because what you find or what I found when I went into the Garo community was that, with the advent of market economy, and with the advent of this kind of pressure, the people were easily lead into believing that development for them should be mainstream development. Which would put them...which basically put them at a disadvantage because if development is judged purely on economic terms then you're throwing the baby out with the bath water because a lot of the richness that they have in their culture is something that they should not give up, and is something that really, even in modern societies, we would want. A lot of the lifestyle, the cooperative systems, the systems of being able to keep a very complex village civic system in place with very little crime and with absolutely no violence. And with a very public system of checks and balances in a community; all these there is a tendency to put it aside and believe that you can...that by joining a modern system, they will get closer to development. One of the advantages of some of the NGOs, some of the organizations that IFAD works through is that they meet on a regular basis with the people and they actually speak to them about what are the areas that they themselves would like to develop and then they temper it because, for example, one very important member in my village decided that he wanted to mortgage his land and get a bank loan and buy a jeep, which was he was then going to start a taxi service with. And this is the man who doesn't - cannot drive - and doesn't know anything about cars or jeeps. And so, you know, there was this sort of temperance and there was a tendency to work with these NGOs, with this Non-Governmental Organizations and take things through sort of on a more conceptual level before major mistakes were made.

**JENKINS:** Cristina....

**VERAN:** Well, I'd like to ask you, Phrang, in terms of the initiatives that IFAD is working with, let's make it specific to wild rice growth for example, I know that some of the issues here in the United States, particularly with the Ojibwe peoples lands in North-central U.S., some of the challenges are fighting things like hybrid crops, bio-piracy and even, sort of, the stealth introduction of some of these genetic mutations by corporations who are funding,

competitive sort of businesses with the indigenous farmers. And I was wondering how... if that's something that's being addressed in your work, and if that's also affecting the peoples in Northeast India as well?

**ROY:** If you look at the people of Northeast India like most indigenous communities, I think the loss of autonomy or the sense that they're losing autonomy on matters that...well over which they have traditionally had control is probably always a challenge for them. And if, as Dinaz says, they look towards modernization as a process, there is a sort of a belief that that may be the... to open a way of bringing back their autonomy.

**JENKINS:** And they see there's a way of preserving their lifestyle – the move to modernity?

**ROY:** Yes, exactly. It's the same thing that it is...

**JENKINS:** My assumption was that they would think of modernity as something different and that that something different was something better than what they had.

**ROY:** You see, indigenous people have...like the Garos who were originally from Tibet, they've moved on from one area to another. And there's always a sense of adaptation. And that's a very important aspect with the indigenous communities. And when they adapt, it's always a coping strategy in terms of what they would be looking at. And here I think what we have tried to do, understanding that aspect, is – first and foremost take note of their indigenous knowledge of their indigenous community. But also, don't take a romantic view because many of these are adapting to new forces and many of them are confused, and therefore start a dialogue with them as to how you can work. For example, the Garos belong to a matrilineal\* society, the property goes to the youngest daughter and therefore women's position is much better than in many other societies.

[ \* The Garo, Jaintia and Khasi tribes who inhabit Meghalaya have a matrilineal society. That is, the inheritance goes to the women of the house. It also means that the men are married into the women's families. They come to live in their wife's home and the children bear the surnames of their mothers.]

**JENKINS:** Does that mean that the wife of the household is in charge of the money?

**ROY:** Yes, in terms of...

**JENKINS:** But you don't have to be in indigenous society for that to happen, I can tell you. You should see my wife (laughter). Haider...

**RIZVI:** In most indigenous societies there is relatively more gender equality, so when the outside world penetrates into the indigenous territories; mining companies, logging companies, there is indigenous labor involved in that, the clearing job kind of thing. The cash is introduced and women, who used to work along side men in the farms or in other areas... There are many stories coming out from the Philippines, from North America, South America

that women are no longer productive in the economy of the area, rather they have been reduced to the status of house women. In Garo, what's the scene in Garo in this context? I ask both of you.

**ROY:** We did a study of the matrilineal societies of four communities in Asia and we found that there is a breakdown of the matrilineal society as modernization comes in because the knowledge of women on rice seeds for example is quite unique. When you bring in hybrid seeds, it's a knowledge that they don't have and generally the extension worker will go to the man because that's the sort of mainstream they're used to and therefore the introduction comes their way. So there's a certain amount of breakdown and challenges that are taking place.

**JENKINS:** That's an irony? Modernity, progress leads to less equality is what you're saying?

**ROY:** Yes.

**RIZVI:** And less equality leads to conflicts and violence as well. As I know in that community there was militancy a few years ago. Dinaz, can you tell us what's the situation there now like?

**STAFFORD:** Well, there is still...any society when they feel dispossessed and when they feel, as Phrang says, that they're losing their autonomy, is going to express it in some form or the other. And there've been many indigenous people in those areas that have resorted to militancy. Amongst the Garos it's quite disorganized, and it's not got a very strong political structure. It tends to be more an expression of dissatisfaction and dispossession and it's usually exhibited in kidnapping and extortion.

**JENKINS:** I think that's a good moment to look at the second clip. Here's a second clip from the film, "Still, the children are here":

### **VIDEO ROLL-IN [2'03"]**

#### **"STILL, THE CHILDREN ARE HERE"**

**GARO WOMAN NARRATING (subtitle):** Everyone will store the same grains...Our mothers and grandmothers planted it...Now I'll pass it on to my children...Mitim rice, Sarengma rice, Aganchi rice, Kuddep rice, Black rice, Tongdon rice are all stored here. Stored and eaten.

### **VIDEO OUT**

**JENKINS:** Phrang Roy, how active are international agricultural agencies in trying to promote and protect this sort of bio-diversity that we see in these communities such as the



Garo? Do you have a movement to assist farmers for example to get their crops to markets or is it all subsistence farming?

**ROY:** No, we had... a number of our projects have focused on production but also on marketing because it's important to look at that ...because there are also landless people who have no lands. And they get their resources by their other colleagues selling to the markets. So there is a big attempt, but the important aspect that we try to look in the markets is that how do markets work for poor people rather than coping with....

**JENKINS:** Can you give us a success story?

**ROY:** We've had two or three in a number of places in India and other areas where in terms of rice what we've done is that we been trying to look at organic rice...in this the Northeast India has been protected in early years and therefore there's a lot of organic land that can be grown there and there's some attempts made in this respect.

**VERAN:** Dinaz, I'd like to ask you...well, this year's theme for the permanent forum on indigenous issues, here at the UN, is on indigenous women. As a woman yourself working there with other indigenous women, could you give us a sense on perhaps what cultural significance wild rice has for the people, aside from being a commodity?

**STAFFORD:** I think for the Garo people particularly, and the Garo women particularly, as Phrang said, it's a matrilineal society, so it's the women who own the land on which they have been growing this rice. And in the film, the old women who are given a lot of respect, time and time and again say that we are growing this as our mothers and grandmothers taught us. So, the entire culture is really based on growing things and allowing things to grow, which is actually a very healthy way for a society to develop, and you can see this in their understanding of the different crops and their positioning of the different crops, which are different crops of rice, which are positioned according to the ancient law of women. And this information has been in the film, they always say our mothers taught us, and our grandmothers in turn taught our mothers.

**RIZVI:** And they are teaching their children.

**STAFFORD:** And they are now teaching their children, yeah.

**JENKINS:** Dinaz, we don't have much time left, and there's one question I'd like to ask you, which is: If there is one thing you want an audience to come away from, come away from watching this movie with, what would that be?

**STAFFORD:** I think what strikes me about the Garos as an example of indigenous people is that they...it would allow, it should allow an audience to reconsider what development really should be.

**JENKINS:** That's a pretty good note to end on I think. Thank you both of you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Our guests had been Phrang Roy, Assistant President for the International Fund for Agriculture Development, and Dinaz Stafford, author of the film, "Still, the children are here", about the Garo people in Northeast India. They were interviewed by Haider Rizvi of Inter Press Service/IPS, and Cristina Veran of the Village Voice.

I'm Tony Jenkins. Thank you for joining us, we invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

**ANNOUNCER:** Electronic transcripts of this programme may be obtained free of charge by contacting World Chronicle at the address on your screen:

World Chronicle

United Nations, Room S-827

New York, N.Y., 10017.

Or by email at: [besa@un.org](mailto:besa@un.org)

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