Stories from the Hill Tracts

Samia A Rahim

It was a sweltering evening in Rangamati at the Ashika Training Centre on April 22 as people rushed to put final touches on their "films" while we prepared to screen all the Digital Stories that were created at the five-day Digital Story-Telling Workshop. Some participants were still adding music to their stories, while others were putting in titles and credits to their films. Finally, all the Digitals Stories were ready to be screened and the lights went out, and participants and their friends and relatives took seats to watch the fruits of labour over the past five days. As each Digital Story was projected on the big screen, the auditorium filled with the voice of

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the individual participant narrating her story and the only thing that one could occasionally hear besides the lilting of words and emotions, was the muffled crying from among the audience. The anxiety of having one's personal story project in front of a room full of strangers- stories that one may never had had the opportunity to express before- and hearing one's own voice reign in the room was, for most participants, overwhelming.

Digital Stories, which are part oral history and part personal archiving, are 2-3 minute "films" that participants make to record experiences of their lives in their own words, voices and perspectives. These "films" are actually multimedia presentations that involved participants narrating scripts that they have written which are then matched with personal images and drawings. Music is added to provide a soundtrack to participants' stories, along with a title and credits, to complete the Digital Story. Participants use computers to combine the different elements of their story. Digital Stories are different from other mediums of story-telling (documentaries, film, radio) in that the story-teller is in complete charge of the editing process- the participant herself chooses what to say, how to say it, what images to include to represent their words and what to leave out. This complete control over one's own story is what makes Digital Stories so unique and powerful.

As we watched one Digital Story after another, the accounts of struggle, identity, change, success and survival narrated by the Hill women provided a rich repository of stories chronicling the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The participants' narratives ranged from relating the experiences of working for women's rights and of learning to sing and perform despite protests from their community to the trials of running a business. A prominent trait of their stories was that the obstacles faced by some of the women because of being women were compounded by their ethnic identity and its marginalisation in society.

It was interesting that most of the Digital Stories created brought up the issue of marriage - participants related how some of them had gotten married early, how they struggled to study after their marriage and after having children, and the unhappy marriages that some of their parents had. Marriage was seen as a challenge, a milestone and as a rite of passage. In most cases, the fears with which some of the participants entered into marriage were replaced by the strengths they drew from it.

Partipants Mull Over How To Write Their Stories.

Motherhood too came up in many stories. Many of the participants mentioned the tremendous joy they felt in becoming a mother, while a few also stated that raising a family was accompanied by the worry about whether they could juggle the different priorities they had.

Education was a prominent theme in the Digital Stories. In "Amar Shukhmoi Jibon" (My Happy Life), the participant, who happens to be the only woman in her community to have attended university, describes eloquently the social barriers she faced in her endeavours to seek formal education. She secured good results in her HSC exams, but to her devastation, her family put a stop to her studies. They feared that the increased knowledge would change her manners and behaviour and that she would end up marrying an outsider as there would be no eligible members in the Khiyang community to marry her. Her studies were halted for a long period until a benefactor sponsored her education and enabled her to earn a Bachelor's degree. She now lives and works for her community and is respected by her elders. She feels that she has proven that receiving higher education does not mean that people will leave their roots but rather will help it thrive. This participant's personal struggle for education, also revealed the circumstance of her community- dwindling in numbers and struggling to exist in a society where their culture and heritage is not given due recognition. Pursuing education is contentious precisely because Adivasi languages, cultures and traditions are not included in mainstream or regional curriculum and therefore seeking education seems superfluous and is seen as stepping away from one's heritage.

Another participant's Digital Story revealed the sexual harassment she had faced at university. "Amar Protibadh" (My Revolt) narrates how the participant was given poor marks in her university exams and made to attend an improvement course. One day the Professor requested her to come to his office, upon which, he took the opportunity to touch her physically and make sexual advances. She narrated the disgust she felt not only towards the Professor but also towards herself because of the advantage this professor, old enough to be her father, took of her. She stayed in her room for seven straight days without speaking to anyone. Full of anger, she wanted to complain about the professor's behaviour. But she feared that no one would believe a Pahari student making such serious allegations about a successful and well-respected Bengali professor. She was anxious whether such an accusation might turn the Bengali students on campus against the Pahari students. So she remained silent, crippled by the fact that her Professor made her fail in order to fulfill his selfish and predatory desires. She decided to resist what had happened to her by challenging herself to accomplish well academically. She finished her Honours, and then went on to earn a Masters, and then pursued an MBA. She has since been working to support women who have faced violence in their lives. She ends by saying that this incident has made her conscious and proactive about standing up against injustices in society and to support movements for women's rights.

In "Borno Mala" (Alphabet), we witnessed a participant share her dream to keep the Chakma language alive. She narrates that the Chakma script is unfamiliar to many among its own community as most members only learn to speak it and do not know how to write the

language. As such the script is left unlearned and unutilised, and she fears that one day no one will know it. With their language becoming unfamiliar, soon their histories and cultures will also evaporate. A turning point in her life occurred when recently a linguist from abroad contacted her regarding the Chakma language. The linguist visited Bangladesh and the participant taught her the Chakma grammar, language and script. This has sparked hope in her that perhaps the Chakma language will perhaps not disappear. She wished that their language would be taught in schools and people would have the opportunity to learn to read and write it. She concluded by saying that she dreams of the day her mother tongue will find recognition and when, like full citizens, their community members can speak and write in their language and keep it alive.

Other narratives focused on loss and violence. "Narokio Ghotona: 11th January, 1998" (Nightmare unfolds: 11th January, 1998) relates how a participant lost her elder brother in the fighting that ensued after the signing of CHT Peace Accord, how they felt in receiving his mutilated body and the terrible weight and void that it has left in their lives. In "Proshno?" (Questions?) another participant made a powerful account of the periods of violence she has lived through in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and questioned the state's commitment to peace and their rights as citizens given the recent carnage in Baigaichori in February 2010.

The moving personal stories that the participants created gave a glimpse not only of their individual histories and struggles but also spoke about the communities they live in and its circumstances. The range of stories that our participants created mirrored the diversity among the participants themselves. The twelve participants of our workshop came from various backgrounds, occupations, religions and ethnic groups. They were women's rights and peace activists, staff at local NGOs, university students and performers of music and dance. They ranged between 20-35 years of age and came from Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban areas. The majority of them came from the Chakma community, while the rest belonged to the Tripura, Marma and Khiyang communities. Some were very familiar with using computer technology, but others had little or no experience at all.

After screening all the Digital Stories, participants spoke about the exhilaration they felt at having created a story about their life by themselves. Everyone appreciated their enhanced technical and creative capacities. Some were excited because they felt that not only have they learnt how to create a Digital Story, but they hope to go back to their communities and hold similar workshops to document the stories of their communities.

The participant who had made the Digital Story about the sexual harassment she had faced in university said that it was the first time in her life that she has spoken up about the incident and to have been able to present it to a whole document it and whole roomful of strangers was cathartic. It allowed her to put behind the immense anger, disgust, and shame that consumed her for many years and move ahead. Her emotion-ridden speech was a reminder of the power of story-telling- how it heals, how it helps us to remember incidents in our own light and the way it deeply validates our experiences.

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[1] The writer is a Communications Officer and Research Associate for the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme at BRAC Development Institute (BDI). BDI has a focus on using innovative tools to conduct research and Digital Story-Telling is one of the tools it is employing. The Digital Story-Telling workshop was held in the Chittagong Hill Tracts to engage participants of researches taking place in those areas on security perspectives and media production by minority communities.