

Dear Friends,

Welcome and thank you all for supporting Maureen and Laurie's fund raising event for Moanoghar School. It is a school at the outskirts of Rangamati town of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (shortly known as CHT) Bangladesh, where I come from.

Nearly 2 years now, in November 2014, Laurie and Maureen visited Bangladesh. We learnt from Laurie's speech at the parliament and other settings and through Saikat Khisa Suja's debut film *Chittagong Hill Tracts and Moanoghar - Towards a Better Future*, June 2015, that Maureen and Laurie had marvellous time in Dhaka and Chittagong, and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. They made a visit to Moanoghar school and a new relationship, a love affair, developed between Moanoghar and the magnificent Australian iconic couple Maureen+Laurie. yes iconic Australian couple, and everybody in this room and beyond will agree with me on this point, if not on other points.

This love affair has not remained limited between Moanoghar and Granville, but has been spreading in Australia, particularly in Sydney, through Maureen+Laurie, friends and supporters' work. Another new connection has been built through work of Vera and Robyn, friends of Maureen+ Laurie, following a program 'Days for Girls' in Moanoghar. I will discuss it soon.

Last year's Maureen fundraising event raised over \$ 3,000 for the school and solar power for a village they visited at the edge of the Kapati Lake in Rangamati. With some \$ 2,000 Moanoghar set up 'Moanoghar Laurie and Maureen Knowledge Fund'. I invite my friend Suja/ Saikat Khisa to give some information about the Fund and its use (this year the fund was used for excursion of some year 9 and 10 students to a govt's CHT museum in Rangamati and museum of the Chakma Royal family).

After Suja I will get back to you.

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Moanoghar school now has 1351 children. 805 are residential.

There are children from 11 indigenous groups: Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Mro, Khyang, Khumi, Bawm, Chak, Pangkhua and Santal. Santals are indigenous to northern part of Bangladesh. In CHT we have a small number of Santals who were brought by the British during its colony.

CHT's indigenous population is 750,000, which is very small compare to Bangladesh's current population of 160 million.

Some indigenous groups are quite small, Khyang population in 2012 was about 3,000 and Khumis in 1998 was about 2,000, others, like Lushais are only a couple of hundreds.

Moanoghar was established in 1974 as an orphanage to accommodate war affected children of 1971 war, in which Bangladesh gained its independence after a 9-month bloody war against the colonial Pakistan government.

In newly found Bangladesh, its Constitution was adopted in 1972. CHT people demanded constitutional recognition of their identity and retention of CHT's autonomy through their Awamileague leaders and an elected leader, MP. But it was denied. The 1972 Constitution only recognised one nation that is Bengali, and one language that is Bengali.

In 1975, the founding leader and the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in a military coup and Bangladesh became militarised. All democratic activities were suppressed all over Bangladesh, and CHT leaders were forced to go into hiding. Since 1975 Bangladesh have had many democratic and military governments but CHT remained militarised.

From 1976 until the signing of the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord, CHT's political party JSS and its armed wing, Shanti Bahini, led an armed insurgency against the Government of Bangladesh. The insurgency was in response to the denial of constitutional recognition of CHT's autonomous status and their identity and their political, economic and social marginalization. Finally the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord ended about 25 years of Bangladesh's internal war in the CHT. As a result of the war, there are many children without parents, or with one parent, and many children live in abject poverty in a war devastated region of Bangladesh. Moanoghar is a hope for many disadvantaged children for education and survival.

March this year, during my visit to Bangladesh, I went to Moanoghar and did a one-day workshop 'Days for Girls'. It is to learn handmade sanitary pads, which are made of layers of cloths and a layer of water proof material, which we learnt from Vera and Robyn. I met Vera at the last year's Maureen's fundraising event for the CHT. About 15-20 girls and supervisors of Moanoghar worked that day despite there were not many sewing machines. We, Taposi Chakma, Dr Bibha Chakma and I, supported the workshop. We also received a small fund from BODHI Australia for the project. I am optimistic that many girls will be helped to be healthy and confident through this project.

I also had the opportunity to meet two children, Uttara and Kampan, who we support from Australia. These two children are without parents who were killed in violent attack (by Bengali settlers who came to take over their homestead) in front of Uttara who was only 3 years old, and Kampan was 11 months old. I want to thank my co-contributors, Suja, Mitra, Taposi, Amit, Bibha, Nabarun, Anil and others for your support. Both are academically not fantastic, but healthy and happy. Kampan is a good soccer player and Uttara enthusiastically takes part in cultural programs. She loves dancing. I am told by Moanoghar authorities that there are many with

childhood trauma and other personal factors which may cause difficulties for some to be academically good.

Moanoghar is now trying to set up a Technical vocational school for those who may not be good for tertiary education. Plus there will be difficulties to organise educational support after high school at Moanoghar. Moanoghar's application to government has been so far unsuccessful. But there is a goal and hope someday it will be reached.

Among some inspiring stories one story is the Higher Education Loan Programme (HELP). HELP was established in 2006 by involving ex-Moanogharians and support from general Jummas. (It is a kind of HECS in Australia, in an absence of bank ex-moanogharians and public are donating to HELP to provide loans to students). Now 50 students are receiving loans for tertiary studies. A total of 178 people are contributing to HELP. 99 are Moanogharians, 24 Moanoghar staff (teacher and non-teaching staff), and the rest 55 are from CHT Jumma society.

7 Memorial scholarships for tertiary education are now supervised by Moanoghar's HELP donated by different Jumma families.

I, however, would humbly like to highlight that Moanoghar is much more than a refuge for disadvantaged children.

It is an institution which demonstrates a path towards peace in Bangladesh. While the CHT has been a site of conflict by state's repressive policies towards its indigenous peoples, work of many Bengalis, who are the majority population in the country, for Moanoghar offers hope and reconciliation between Bengalis and indigenous peoples of the CHT for the benefit of all in Bangladesh.

There are many renowned and general Bengalis and their organisations offer moral and financial support to Moanoghar.

The Rotary Club of Dhaka Kawran Bazar branch and the Afzalunnessa Foundation supported Moanoghar for a number of good years.

The Independent University of Bangladesh, currently provides free tuition to 5 students from Moanoghar to study in their various faculties.

University women's Federation college, Dhaka, has awarded full scholarship to 9 female students for the Higher Secondary School Certificate level.

The Square Medical College & Nursing Institution is providing scholarships to 3 female students for Senior Nursing course.

AK Khan Foundation, Chittagong, has been supporting 42 students providing fund for food and tuition fees.

There are some Bengali owned private organisations which make occasional donation. There are also some Bengalis, including renowned personalities, actors, theatre workers, academics who sponsor some children in Moanoghar.

Currently about 20 children of Moanoghar are sponsored by Bengali individuals.

While there is a need of more efforts from all parties, and particularly from state, for building trust and reconciliation, positive actions from civil society Bengalis and Jummas through Moanoghar give confidence to bring a difference to situation of the CHT and bring hope for peace in Bangladesh.

This hope for peace is also reflect through participation of Bengali friends with Jummas in tonight's gathering.

Now I want to talk about a film, Maw' Theng Gaari/ Mor Thengari (My Bicycle)

It is a Chakma language film, with English subtitle, made by Aung Rakhine. He is an indigenous Rakhine from Cox's Bazar. After living some years in the CHT, he decided to focus his cinema drama on the Chakma community, because, as he states, 'they struggled more than any other indigenous group of the country.'<sup>1</sup> It is a digitally produced film, perhaps the biggest budget CHT film to date, which took 10 years to complete.

The plot of the film centres on an unemployed indigenous Chakma youth, Kamal and his much-loved bicycle, with which he returns to his CHT home after failing to find a job in the town. The bicycle is a novelty in his village. He makes a living ferrying people and goods with it. But his life with the bicycle is disrupted by run-ins with both the powerful locals in the village and (perhaps) the Bangladesh security force who occupy the CHT. Kamal's bicycle is stolen and he finds it wrecked in the jungle. The damaged bicycle is a metaphor for his shattered dreams. In the final scene Kamal is shown to leave his home just as he arrived in a small boat on the Kaptai Lake and a new motor bike to arrive in a boat.

The experience of living in occupied CHT, one may anticipate constant threat of violence in the film. But there is no portrayal of overt violence. While the presence of the military and/or paramilitary is alluded to, only rarely are they actually encountered. In one episode soldiers are shown marching over a child's toys as the child withdraws to his mother in fear. The military uniform shown in the episode (camouflage and sneakers, not military boots) is not precisely that of the Bangladesh military, leaving other interpretations open.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://Onek.khonatalkies.com/mybicycle.php?videoid=JU2oRdp4pIQ>

The film was premiered at the 13th International Short and Independent Film Festival in Dhaka in December 2014. Censor Board of Bangladesh controls commercial release of films and Aung applied to the Board for its release. Although the Board initially issued a viewing date in July 2015 for the film's review, it deferred this viewing based on a written complaint from Lt. Colonel Mohammad Jahangir Alam that claimed Rakhine's film had been screened without censor approval, even though no approval is required for film festival screenings. The same letter complained that the film contained scenes and dialogue detrimental to the Bangladesh government and security force.

Rakhine pointed out in an interview with the Deutsche Welle Bangla that the scene that shows military personnel passing by is symbolic, and that the film does not specify their identity as being the Bangladesh Security Force. To realise his point it must be understood that in the post-Accord CHT, military uniforms and arms end up in the hands of criminals who are involved in activities like extortion and kidnapping. Perhaps, some suggest, to legitimise the military's presence in the post-Accord CHT.

The film was shown at a number of film festivals in Bangladesh and internationally, including in Italy, UK, Estonia, Russia, Sweden, Finland and India. It won an international award, for the best script at the 2015 Silver Akbuzat International Festival of National and Ethnic Cinema in Ufa, Russia. *Maw Theng Gaari*, however, has yet to be allowed commercial screening in Bangladesh.

As it is not released, I can't show the whole film, but we will see some promotion clips of the film and an Al Ja-Zeera news clip regarding the film.

The first film clip starts showing Kamal returning home in a small boat with the bicycle and remembering the old Rangamati and villages which were drowned by the Kaptai Lake to produce electricity. Kaptai lake, created in the early 1960s displaced 100,000 Jummas, nearly one-third of the CHT's population, mostly Chakmas, submerging numerous homes, villages, towns, including the Chakma Raja's palace complex. The lake inundated 40% of the CHT's best agricultural land. In the absence of cultivable land, over 40,000 displaced people were forced to emigrate to India, where many still remain as 'stateless persons.' Unfortunately, till now less than 5% of the produced electricity from the Kaptai hydro-electric facility is used for the CHT, and the rest is used for outside the CHT. It is an example of many ongoing economic injustice towards the CHT.

The last clip ends showing Kamal leaving his village with his damaged bicycle, while a new vehicle, a motor bike is coming in.

I must mention, there is a strong voice from Bengali civil society in Bangladesh for national commercial release of *Maw Theng Gaari*, a non-Bengali language film of

Bangladesh. In 45 years of Bangladesh's Independence in 2016, national release of a Bangladeshi non-Bengali film is yet to happen.

Before the screening of the film clips, I whole heartedly thank Laurie and Maureen and all friends for your generosity and support. Thanks to Taposi, Seema and Rahul, Joya, Antara, Tally and many others, sorry I am missing your names, for donating goods for auction.

Enjoy the film.

Kabita Chakma, Russian Social Club, Sydney, 2 September 2016

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlvoF5VF\\_MI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlvoF5VF_MI)

Promo 2 (Khana Talkies, wife n work with the bike, broken bike +Military, leaving home, arrival of new, a motor bike)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSatMebetTw>

Promo (Pandulipi Military, military + leaving home)

Promo 3 (pandulipi karkhana: coming home with the bike):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hyn9HBumKl4>