

CULTURAL CONFLICT AND EVERYDAY FORMS OF 'DISCRIMINATION' IN CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS, BANGLADESH.

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A. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The research concerns the ethnic people of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) which is located at the southeastern part of Bangladesh bordering Myanmar and India. The hill tracts host twelve different ethnic communities from the unknown time. These ethnic people (popularly called as *Pahari*) differ significantly from the mainstream population of Bangladesh Bengali (*Bangali*). The historical development of the CHT has marked it as an 'other' and 'isolated' place since the colonial administration started from around 1860 to date. Although British administration reduced some traditional customs of the *Paharis*, they also preserved their distinct characteristics by proclaiming the CHT Manual 1900. During the Pakistan period, these non-Muslim ethnic people were treated as 'uncivilized'; Pakistan government did not consider them as "human" or citizen of Pakistan, instead it adopted hostile attitude toward the *Paharis* of CHT. They had started to repress the *Paharis* in every case. Kauffmann lamented that "the Pakistan government would not tolerate that there are citizens in its territory whom outsiders could call 'primitives' or even 'savages'" (Schendel 2000).

Since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, conflict between the *Pahari* people and the state has worsened due to immigration of *Bangali* settlers, military occupation and environmental pressures in CHT. The government of Bangladesh classified the *Pahari* people as 'estranged and isolated'. The official program designed to 'civilize' *Pahari* people viewing them 'primitive' & 'backward'. Local *Pahari* identity, cultural distinctiveness, livelihood practices are officially unrecognized and often seen as contrary to national laws, policies and objectives. Successive governments have always legitimized the militarization of the Hill Tracts. Over the last quarter century, *Pahari* people have been involved in a struggle for autonomy from the Bangladesh state. In the name of counter insurgency, massive violations of human rights were committed by the military forces. Many *Pahari* people along with *Bangali* people were killed in the course of conflict and violence committed during 1976- 1997 in CHT. However, in December 02, 1997 a historical "Peace Accord" was signed by the Government of Bangladesh and the *Jana Samhati Samity* (JSS- the political platform of the people of CHT) to establish peace and communal harmony in CHT that ironically results the CHT neither a secured nor a peaceful land for its natives. Therefore, the study focused on the local perceptions toward conflict and discrimination in CHT where cultural gap and cultural hatred generated the crisis over the years. The study also examined the significance of the Peace Accord-1997 that was signed 11 years ago.

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B. METHODOLOGY AND CONTENT

Research objectives and methods

There are many documents on the overall situation of CHT but very few are as research documents. Being an anthropological site, the CHT has not been explored by local and foreign anthropologists. We have few anthropological literatures on the ethnic culture, ethnography of ethnic community, or comparison study between ethnic groups and ethnic conflict; most are ethnographic literatures. Researchers, scholars and government policies have been making the CHT crisis as either a political or an economic problem overlooking the cultural dimensions what according to the locals are the underlying causes and basics of the conflict. The research is planned to that end, as I consider that, the underlying causes are the fundamental in this situation which are behind and intensely deep-rooted with one's identity and self-determinism.

However, I visited Rangamati district of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)- a distinct region in Bangladesh in terms of its ethnic, cultural and environmental diversity. The purpose of the fieldwork was mainly to understand the cultural dynamics of conflict and discrimination in this region. However, to reveal the underlying causes of the conflict the research questions were:

- How do *Pahari* people perceive the conflict between them and *Bangali* community in CHT?
- How do *Pahari* people identify the everyday forms of 'discrimination' in CHT?
- Is there any inter-ethnic conflict and 'discrimination' in CHT?
- What is the attitude of the *Bangali* people toward the conflict and 'discrimination' in CHT?
- How do *Pahari* and *Bangali* people evaluate the Peace Accord 1997 and peace process?
- What is the impact of the Peace Accord 1997 toward peace and communal harmony?

In line with the above mentioned objective field research was conducted in Rangamati District- the oldest district of CHT. In-depth interviews with 15 *Pahari* and *Bangali* people living in CHT were conducted to get their personal experiences and perceptions to the problem. Three focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted to understand the collective attitudes toward the problems. Three special cases were studied as Case Study, and two key informants were consulted about the overall situation and information gathered from the informants through interviews and discussion along with observations.

Local perception towards conflict and peace process

Ethnic perceptions toward conflict and discrimination

According to the local *Pahari* people, they have had no problem with the *Bangali* people who naturally migrated to CHT from the nearby districts since pre-Pakistan period. They used to lead a harmonious life in CHT until planned population transfer program was taken by the government since Pakistan period. The old *Bangali* community used to enjoy and adapt with the ethnic culture and customs but the new *Bangali* Muslim settlers perceived the CHT as a jungle and hill, so also its people are *jongli* (who live in the jungle) and 'primitive'. The State of Pakistan and Bangladesh also considered them as 'backward' and 'separationist'. Therefore, the settlers with the assistance of security forces attempted to occupy and control over the land and the people. The settler *Bangali* and security forces forcibly raped

many helpless ethnic girls/women either at their home or in jungle or crops-land. While a girl/women works lonely around the locality she cannot not manage to escape her if any law enforcing agent or settler *Bangali* attempt to rape her or sexually assault. There are many *Pahari* families whose relative(s) were either raped or sexually harassed by the *Bangali* or security personnel in CHT. Therefore, cultural clash, consumptive and materialistic mentalities are responsible for generating violence in CHT.

Everyday forms of 'discrimination' in CHT

Since the *Bangali* settlement in CHT, *Paharis* found their traditional life was no more out of danger. In everyday life, they experienced that the land what they had nurtured and prepared to inhabitable from unknown time, become uninhabitable and fearful for its natives. The hill economy, political organization, civil administration, and security forces are dominating by the *Bangali*. Security forces (mainly military forces) not only are assisting the *Bangali* people to occupy lands, they also supporting new settlements displacing *Pahari* people from their own land. *Paharis'* everyday movement become highly restricted and controlled by them. Experiencing all forms of discrimination and deprivation *Pahari* people's realization is "life is not ours".

Inter-ethnic conflict and discrimination in CHT

Until *Bangali* settlement in CHT, there was no communal clash. Since the *Bangali* settlement, communal conflict between *Bangali* and *Pahari* people started. Until 1979 the communal clash was limited between these two groups. Since the day of "Peace Accord" (December 02, 1997) a segment of *Pahari* people publicly opposed the peace accord terming it as anti-interest of the *Paharis*. Many *Pahari* people have been killed in the course of violence between two *Pahari* organizations (JSS and UPDF). Locals claim that, state or military forces have been patronizing the UPDF (United People's Democratic Front) against the JSS to "divide and rule" the CHT, so that, they cannot strongly move for the full implementation of the peace accord. Besides this violence, competition among *Paharis* has raised due to the newly created job market and other opportunities for ethnic people since the "peace accord".

Bangali perception toward conflict and discrimination

Old *Bangali* people living in CHT think that *Pahari* people could not take easily the unexpected huge migration into CHT from the plain districts. Government of Bangladesh could consult with the local people before launching huge population movement. Natural resources and life of *Pahari* people turned into threat because of the aggression of the *Bangali* settlements. According to some of the settler *Bangali*, the turmoil situation of CHT is the result of mutual mistrust and misunderstanding. Some other opine, as a citizen of Bangladesh every one has the right to stay anywhere of the country, but the ethnic people did not accept the migration of *Bangali* people. "Emigrating from other countries (for example, Myanmar, Thailand) these ethnic people have been enjoying the natural resources of CHT extensively. When poor *Bangali* people desired to share the resources, the *Paharis* turned into fierce and started violence in CHT".

Genesis of the crisis

Local *Pahari* people who differ significantly from the *Bangali* people in terms of their appearance, language, religion and socio-cultural organization identify some causes behind the crisis in CHT. Cultural hatred or underestimation, cultural chauvinism, cultural hegemony and ethnocentrism are behind the exposed conflict and violence. These un-exposed and underlying cultural aspects are

responsible and generated the following authoritarian policies and standpoints that turned CHT into the turmoil situation.

Hydro-electric project (Kaptai dam): In 1960 Pakistan government constructed a dam in Rangamati without prior consultation with the local people that displaced the *Paharis* from their land and livelihoods.

Population movement: Military government of Bangladesh planned to balance the population in CHT so that the government can easily control the *Paharis*. From 1979 to 1984, at least 0.4 million *Bangali* people were migrated into CHT from plain districts of Bangladesh who took overall control of CHT with the support of law enforcing agencies.

Insurgency and counter-insurgency: The *Paharis* had been reacting to the influx of the *Bangali* settlers by armed resistance. Terming this movement as 'insurgency' the government of Bangladesh had deployed huge number of military forces to restraint the conflict situation in CHT in the name of 'counter-insurgency'. Eventually many *Bangali*, *Pahari* and military people killed in armed conflict during 1979-1997.

C. OBSERVATION AND CONCLUSION

The historical "peace accord" recognizes CHT as a "region inhabited by 'tribal' people and also recognizes the need of preserving the characteristics of the region and development thereof". Through the historical "peace accord" *Paharis* got few rights, but as vital clauses of the peace accord still remained un-implemented, it could not bring any significant changes in CHT. Nonetheless, *Pahari* people believe that once all clauses of the accord are implemented, there would be no problem in CHT for the *Paharis*. Some *Paharis* also opined that, the accord did not reflect the local demands and there is no direction toward preservation of tradition and ethnic culture. On the other hand, according to the settler *Bangali*, the "peace accord" is against the interest of *Bangali* people. Many *Bangali* settlers including *Samo Adhikar Andolon* (Equal Rights Movement) have been demonstrating to cancel the peace accord.

Though the CHT accord has recognized the special status of the hill people, twelve years after the signing of the accord, local inhabitants of the area are still continuing to live in fear of attacks from *Bangali* settlers often carried out with the apparent connivance of security personnel. Important clauses have remained unimplemented by the last two political governments, and remained in a stage of 'two step forward one step back'. Therefore the post-accord situation in CHT is neither secured nor peaceful. Because of the 'politics of peace', merely political agreement is not able to solve the problem as it is deeply rooted with cultural phenomenon. The existing crisis would not be impossible to resolve if holistic approach is taken.